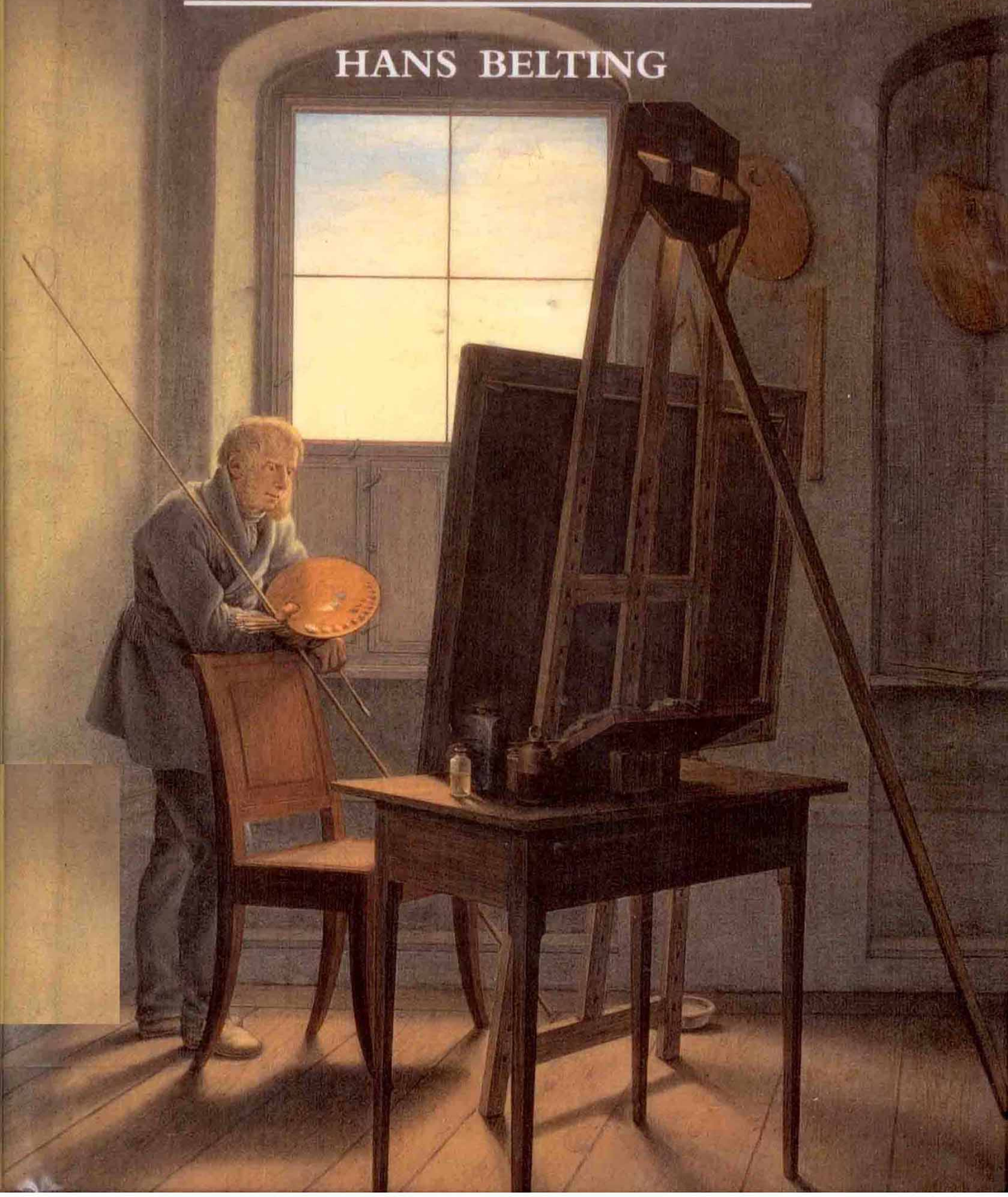

THE GERMANS AND THEIR ART

A TROUBLESOME RELATIONSHIP

HANS BELTING



Hans Belting
Die Deutschen und Ihre Kunst

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A NOTE TO THE ENGLISH READER

I would like to take this opportunity to remind my English readers that this text was written for a German audience. It was my intention to undertake an exercise in memory, and to delve into a history that I share with my compatriots. What for the foreign reader is an account *about* the Germans, is to the German reader a mirror in which to see him or herself. Within the framework of that mirror, memory means understanding what I feel is important to the Germans in the 1990s. German history has plenty to teach us already. This includes matters concerning art which, at first glance, seem rather innocent compared to the rest of what our history has to teach us. Art history, it is true, possesses a narrative of its own. The discipline looks back on a history whose greatness sometimes makes us forget its problems. In the German tradition, a retrospective focus such as this one often inspires the writer to see his work as a new way of looking at the history of German art. For many readers outside Germany, this book will reveal how much art was, and still is, a matter of national concern in Germany, and to what degree it is mediated by contemporary interest and myth. It might also reveal how art historiography is itself a subject of history, which it usually pretends to write from a neutral position.

INTRODUCTION TO THE ENGLISH EDITION

The title of this book of essays might perplex some readers, since *The Germans and their Art: A Troublesome Relationship* formulates a problem that not everyone is familiar with. We are all aware that Germany while striving for ethnic, political and national identity has been the source of problems over the years, or at the very least it has been presented as such. After our most recent unification (Germans have been through this kind of experience before) we are once again faced with the problem of reinventing ourselves as a nation, and art must play a role in this. For does not art provide common ground for the members of society? Will not art help us to temporarily forget our problems through empathy with the painted, sculptured or articulated image?

Germany has been blessed by a fruitful artistic heritage. We are a people famous for our poets and philosophers, who throughout history have formed the German collective consciousness in no less a manner than our 'men of state', as we so respectfully call them. German composers have spread our culture to all corners of the globe. Why, then, is there a 'troublesome relationship' between the Germans and their art?

The difficulty lies in the fact that when I say 'art', I mean specifically the visual arts, which have traditionally played a somewhat different role in German society from that in other countries. Much more than with poetry or music, Germans have had a difficult time coming to terms with the visual arts, which have always had a greater social impact in Germany.

As such, they have mirrored Germany's painful cultural and political development through the years. Scholarly writing on the visual arts has always been done in light of the special role they have played in Germany's history.

This is especially true if I focus, not on how Germans have dealt with art in general, but with 'German art' specifically, the interpretation of which has always been accompanied by denials, insecurity, the need to justify research on the subject, all barely cloaked in the mantle of scholarship. In a country where controversy about German art is commonplace in *feuilleton* articles, when it was published in Germany this small book of essays did not elicit the discussion I had hoped for. I have therefore taken the opportunity on the occasion of its translation into English to expand my thoughts on the subject.

You might ask, and with good reason, why even bother with an analysis of art within a framework of concepts defined by national characteristics, in this case German, in the wake of the international modern movement. The art market is no longer limited by national boundaries. Germany long ago assimilated the precepts of the modern art tradition of the west, with its centre in the United States. New forms of communication media have brought the world closer together. In light of all this, why do I choose to address 'German art'? Strangely enough, the subject has always been extremely controversial in its homeland. In fact, a characteristic that is specific to German art is its propensity to cause heated debate among Germans. Where else but Germany could you find a controversy about 'degenerate art'? The Nazis were not the first to use this term, as is commonly thought. Rather, when they hosted the infamous 1937 exhibition called 'German Art' in the then newly-built *Haus der Kunst* from which they had purged all 'degenerate' works, they were pouring petrol on the fire of

what was already a heated debate. In fact, the 'fight for the arts' had been raging in Germany since 1911, a controversy concerning the definition of German art that had originally split society in half.

This very same controversy has flared up in the last six years, this time concerning the definition of the art of East and West Germany in the light of unification. Paintings by three former East German artists turned up recently in a *Neue Nationalgalerie* exhibition in Berlin, and periodicals and newspapers were full of angry protests about it, even though they encompassed a mere 2 per cent of the total number of works, the remaining 98 per cent being by West German artists. This is yet another example of just how insecure we Germans are in handling questions about our fine arts tradition. It is difficult for us to look upon the two faces of German art because nothing reveals our divided history as drastically as *Zweierlei deutsche Kunst*, those two distinct kinds of art from the cold war period which we seem impelled to reduce to works by free artists, and works by artists who were not free. A recent controversy over admission requirements to the *Berlin Akademie der Künste*, whose eastern branch has since been closed, is a good example of this.

German themes, especially those concerning our divided history, did play a respectable role in the art of West Germany after the war. At first glance, it appears these themes were reintroduced in the early sixties by young painters who had left East Germany to live in the west – Gerhard Richter and Georg Baselitz, to name just two, but this would be a simplification, because the return to German themes coincided with a return to representational painting (abstract art by its very nature does not concern itself with theme per se). The content was clearly more German than the style of the work, even when the finished work often continued an Early German tradition of

expressionism. There were other painters who developed their own, or parodied a 'German' iconography, Anselm Kiefer being the most controversial example. It is part of our artistic tradition that painting dealing with German themes is either directly ideological or is perceived as such, whereby the way to avoid this has often lead to the subversion of all ideology. Scholarly debate about this phenomenon, that there is a particular function of German art in German society, the *deutsche Sonderweg* to use an old term, has yet to be completely understood. And no wonder, studying 'German art' was taboo for many years after the war. The subject was so discredited that scholars in Germany entertained the hope that it would be completely absorbed by the international modern movement. Our cultural identity was supposed to become synonymous with it, regardless if it was to be found in Paris or New York, and not in Cologne or Berlin. In fact, there was so little impulse in West Germany to engage in the process whereby a nation – in this case a new nation – seeks to define its own national identity, let alone an identity in the arts, that scholars feared the worst, especially since the modern movement and German art seemed mutually exclusive. Even Joseph Beuys – a controversial father-figure for postwar German artists, whose art was conjured magically out of an early German culture – became a cult figure in his homeland only after he was successful in New York.

As museum art, contemporary works of art are supposed to occupy neutral territory anyway. Collective themes like 'German art' are foreign to the modern idiom. Works commissioned by the government in the genre have usually, if not always, been complete failures. If modern art even approaches the realms of the real world, then it is not a world of national boundaries, but of the human environment including its media (Pop Art might be a good example here). Neither has history

been a concern within modern art, unless it be the history of art alone, which is employed to justify a continuation of creative activities, whatever they are.

On the other hand, historical themes have always been of great import to German art and to its interpretation, which may explain why our search for identity has not only been a search for personal identity within contemporary culture, but also a search for national identity anchored in the past. Historical continuity has been so important, in fact, that it has been discussed with an almost religious zeal at times. The result has been a persistent *Bilderstreit*, an ongoing controversy about German painting that historically has been as polarized as it has non-aesthetical.

I would like to now leave the current art scene in Germany, which has yet to offer any solutions to the problems that have come with unification and *Zweierlei deutsche Kunst*. In fact, it is precisely this turn of events that inspires me to look at the history of German art and its interpretation. Perhaps there we will find clues as to why it has come down to this. Perhaps there we will discover why German art always ends up being the measure for German identity. For years, the shadow of Auschwitz so darkened our history that at times it seemed everything else of historical importance threatened to be engulfed by its huge shadow and forgotten altogether, but unification has meant a change in this as well. German history, whether we like it or not, has now returned with a vengeance – a vengeance made stronger by being suppressed all these years. In an effort to understand ourselves better, we have once again begun to ask what Germany and the Germans have been in the past. It is a question that I hope will be at least partially answered by the excursion I am about to take. My analysis will not focus on the question of how German German art has been, but rather what we as a people have seen reflected in the

mirror of our own arts, and how this reflection represents how we have developed a sense of our own history, a history with a long tradition of controversy about the arts.

Before I go on I would like to address another debate, which centres on the difficulty Germans have had in dealing specifically with the visual arts, which do not immediately affect the soul as music does, but first fill the eye, that sensory organ most closely bound up with the real world. This alone has made Germans uneasy over the years. Our *Innerlichkeit*, the introspective and brooding side of our nature, has always been drawn to the spiritual/emotional aspect of art which – supposedly – is more fully satisfied by music and poetry than by the visual arts, whose image enters the eye in a predetermined form. Germans have responded more readily to the abstract and imaginary qualities of music and poetry, than to pictorial art's real-world images, which seem to resist our instinct towards *Innerlichkeit*. There is no denying that visual intelligence did not become as highly developed in Germany as it did in Mediterranean countries. The question is whether this deficit stems from a German predisposition, or whether it should be understood in the light of our different attitudes about art, which evolved out of an entirely different history.

In the past, when a German allowed himself to fully experience the arts, he was invariably inspired by the need for spiritual salvation or to be 'in harmony with the world', needs that could only be fulfilled by the arts of Mediterranean cultures. Perhaps that is why one of the classic books on German art is *Der Cicerone* by Jacob Burckhardt, first published in 1855, which understood itself to be, as its subtitle says, 'An Introduction to Enjoying the Art of Italy'. The poet Rilke's most important treatise on art is dedicated to the French sculptor Auguste Rodin, and Peter Weiss describes with genuine pas-

sion the French paintings in the Louvre in his *Ästhetik des Widerstands* (The Aesthetics of Protest). When the call for a German art tradition had reached its loudest among writers of the Romantic period, Goethe – who had been against this development from the start – responded by publishing his *Italian Travels* which despite the autobiographical nature of the text contains his most important observations about pictorial art.

Hidden behind the Romantic *Weltschmerz* for an ideal world was a lack of communication with the real world that was brought to light most effectively by the visual arts. Was it not because of his desire to experience all the pleasures of the world, that Faust was willing to sell his soul to the devil? This is how Thomas Mann formulated it in his famous address ‘Germany and the Germans’ given in Washington, DC a month after the end of World War II: ‘The need for, and aversion to, the world exist side-by-side in the German character,’ he said, ‘so that now it is the cosmopolitan and now the provincial that dominate.’ German nationalism manifested itself as a form of what Mann calls *Weltfremdheit* in the sense that it was alienated from the world. For such impulses, art’s function was to express the German soul, not lead to empathy with the visual world. Mann formulated it like this: ‘If Faust is to symbolize the German soul, then he has to be musical, since a German’s relationship to the world is abstract and mystical. That is, musical.’ Hence the main character in Mann’s *Doctor Faustus* – the ‘German composer, Adrian Leverkühn’ – is presented as a new Faust. Martin Luther, the ‘musical theologian’, first combined German language with German music. I might add that, by doing away with Catholic paintings in his new religious movement he introduced the ‘divided tradition’ that is still characteristic of German art to this day. The painted image, like the world itself, was a threat to Christian

virtues and therefore demanded that a firm stand be taken against it. To facilitate this, the painted image had to be censored, justified and ultimately dominated through theoretical discourse.

This habit of the Germans in applying theory to the understanding and practice of art was addressed in Madame de Staël's unflattering *De l'Allemagne*. In chapter XXXII she writes 'If one looks closely at the arts in Germany, one is obliged to speak more of writers than of artists. The Germans are in all respects more adept at theorizing about art than in practising it.' In the same chapter she continues:

The Germans would rather ponder the meaning of art, than practise it. The minute they have an inkling about it, they set about drawing book loads of conclusions about it. . . . This puts them at a big disadvantage, especially in the arts where everything is sentiment, instinct; one analyzes before one has perceived the matter correctly. It is all fine and good to want to go on without analysis afterwards; but once you have eaten fruit from the Tree of Knowledge (science), the innocence of inborn talent is gone.

German artists have often identified with Richard Wagner, who has always been a controversial figure even for those who love his music. The Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* is a fusion of all forms of art into a single operatic expression. Wagner developed it for a cultivated, worldly audience, despite the fact that it supplants that same world with fantasy and mysticism. In the *Gesamtkunstwerk* the pictorial arts are reduced to mere decoration, its artists to graphic designers, in a synthesis dominated by music. Such was the case of the German landscapist Hans Thoma, who was called to Bayreuth in 1896. In designing the costumes for *Ring der Nibelungen*, Thoma willingly subjugated his art to the sovereignty of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

Even during his lifetime, the contradictory image Wagner put forth of what it meant to be German made most of his colleagues and followers uneasy, an uneasiness that seemed confirmed when the Nazis abused his legacy a generation later. At that time Thomas Mann attempted to bring wild public adulation of Wagner back to earth in a lecture given at Munich University in February 1933, a month before he left Germany for good. Entitled *Leiden und Grösse Richard Wagners* (The Suffering and the Greatness of Richard Wagner), it attempted to present a balanced view of the composer that was precarious indeed. In Wagner's art, 'metaphysical impulse' is presented as a German trait, says Mann, while the ability to enjoy and be open to the world is discovered as a quality that transcends the national. This, he says, was the source of much of what was misunderstood about Wagner. Mann's address was a call for reason in the debate about German art, which by 1933 had become completely unreasonable. But was it reasonable that Wagner addressed German themes by simply turning them into germanic myth? 'Wagner's art is the most sensational self-portrait and self-criticism of the German soul . . . ,' said Mann, 'which it glorifies in a critical and decorative manner.' The nationalism in Wagner is so completely 'saturated with European art' that it should not be reduced to the simple concept of 'German'.

Why talk here of Richard Wagner, who was so often blind to the value of the visual arts? In his tract *Religion und Kunst* he admits that late in life he became an admirer of Raphael's *Sistine Madonna*, which he had seen in Dresden. Yet, this was also the same composer who, as Thomas Mann told his audience in Munich, admitted in a letter to Mathilde Wesendonck that as a young man 'my eye . . . was not sufficient' to perceive the world. He described himself as a barbarian 'who in his year in Paris has yet to visit the Louvre. Doesn't that say it all?' This

was too much for Mann, who protested that this made him 'feel mortified deep down in his soul for painting'. He then goes on to say 'painting is a great art, just as great as the *Gesamtkunstwerk*.' Here Mann touched on a very controversial point, for if the *Gesamtkunstwerk* was to appear on stage in the name of all the arts, then not only did it remove the right of each individual art form to exist alone, it also did away with the role life plays in art. Wagner became an artist with whom the German public identified because he raised art to the level of a national concern, even going so far as to build a national theatre for it in Bayreuth. Wagnerian excess, the escapism of his operatic fantasies, are indicative of the fact that 'too much' and 'too little' are often side-by-side in German art. Wagner would have a major influence on the pictorial arts of Germany, with its long tradition of the spiritual drama.

When the 'fight for the arts' broke out in 1911, it would have been handy if German scholars could have advanced the painter Arnold Böcklin as being as important to painting as Wagner was to music. The controversy concerned the purchase of French paintings by a German museum, which had provoked bitter protests from many, if not most, German artists. The art critic Julius Meier-Graefe had already written *Der Fall Böcklin* (The Case of Böcklin) as a manifesto against the nationalistic trend in German art in 1905, which caused an immediate scandal because its title recalled Nietzsche's manifesto *Der Fall Wagner*. But was Böcklin really the 'Wagner of painting', as the nationalist school thought? No he wasn't, even though his attraction to the effects of stage decoration and Germanic myth might make it seem that way. For lack of fitting protagonists, the protests over the Meier-Graefe article burned themselves out and turned (in 1911) to protesting the 'evils' of foreign influence. Nationalistic overtones had always functioned to exaggerate the importance of art in order to compensate for the

public's lack of conviction in it. When German art did not seem to measure up, it was raised to symbolizing a national ideal in constant struggle against an antagonistic international modern movement, even though by that time modern art had lost all of its national characteristics. The concept that German art was an alternative to modern art, then, was already outdated by the turn of the century, a full generation before the controversy over 'degenerate art' broke out.

I find it intriguing that those artists and scholars searching for historical continuity in the German tradition often stopped to ask themselves seriously whether there was such an artistic tradition to begin with. A good example was a letter that Thoma wrote to the Heidelberg art history professor Henry Thode in 1905: 'If a person asks, what is German? Then he absolutely has to name Grünewald's altar.' But why look for a national identity in, of all places, the arts? Was art to confirm that there was such a thing to begin with? Thode acknowledged German fears in this matter, replying to Thoma's letter by describing the phenomenon as 'rescuing our identity via the arts, in a time in which religion has become meaningless'. As soon as writers and scholars began to identify the arts with the nation, then 'German art' was soon reduced to a tag that could be employed as a bolster to bad scholarship. This transferral of ideals to the arts was pre-programmed for misunderstanding; first because these ideals had been made homeless by the modern movement and second because the main theme of French artists was a modernist image of the world, an image the Germans wanted to escape from. The poet Gottfried Benn complained bitterly in *Kunst und Drittes Reich* (Art and the Third Reich) about the nationalists maintaining 'that Dürer endangered his German-ness' because he dedicated himself to the study of correct proportions developed by the Italian Renaissance. It is a 'centuries-old German malaise', writes

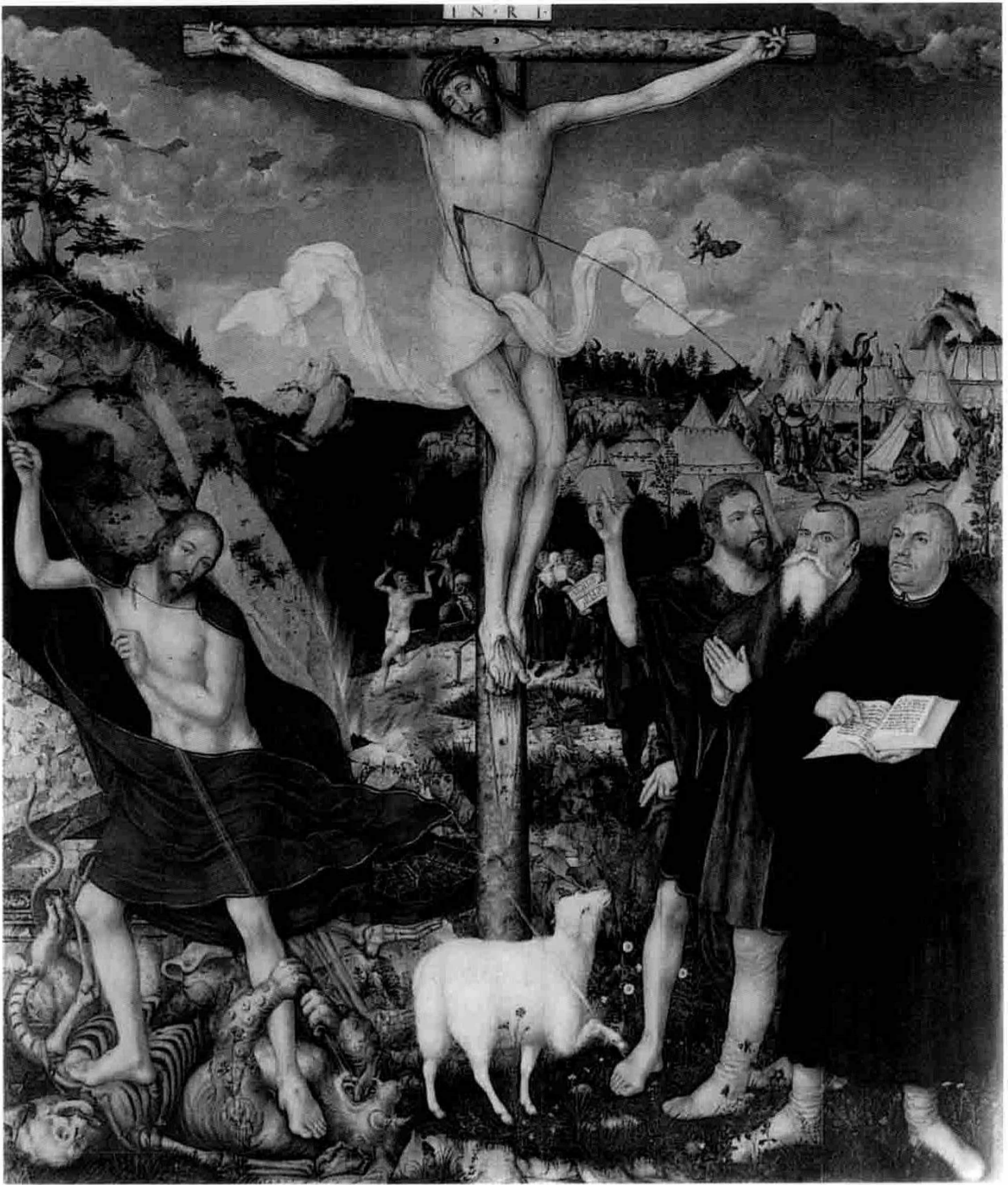
Benn, to look for the 'German substance' in art, and it really is no surprise that the Nazis were empowered by the cheap clichés that came from it. Benn expressed the hope that 'some-day there will be a European scholarly tradition, in which Germany will also want to take part'. When just such a pan-European tradition took centre stage after World War II, and seemed to offer German scholars a way to avoid the controversies of the past, Europe had already come under the influence of the USA.

The manner in which debates about art have been conducted in Germany cannot be fully explained by the concept of an underdeveloped German visual intelligence, or the idea that Germans have less of a sense of beauty. There must have been other reasons the debate was so heated here. There must have been conditions through the years that upset the natural process of interpreting the visual arts in general, conditions best understood within a historical context. The German problem with the arts, then, began as a problem with the visual arts. Before I expand on this, however, I would like to make a few preliminary comments. There were two distinct periods prior to the advent of industrialization, during which German national and cultural identity formed and developed – in the Protestant Germany of Martin Luther, and during Goethe's lifetime. During both periods, *language* was the medium for the push to cultural unification, while images were mistrusted or banned altogether. Luther's translation of the Vulgate into German, his use of the German language in all church matters including the reading of Mass, was a greater influence than religious matters alone. In Goethe's lifetime, German literature stepped out of the shadow of the superiority of *civilisation Française* and entered a golden age of literary achievement. Such was not the case with German pictorial arts during these

same periods, though there were considerable efforts in this direction.

My second comment concerns the role played by the art community in Germany, small though it was, especially in the nineteenth century when art patronage from the aristocracy and the clergy was no longer a forgone conclusion. The retreat into theoretical speculation about art was also a withdrawal from the spontaneous enjoyment of artistic works. In the end, a contemporary German art scene, supported by a wide and cultivated public, had little chance of developing a centre, a heart of art activity, as it had in the French *Salon* in Paris.

The Germany of the Middle Ages did not know this problem. It was a period prior to the modern nation-state, and the German-ruled Holy Roman Empire was pan-European anyway. Neither did the problem arise after the French Gothic was introduced and assimilated as well as was possible. The change came with the Reformation when art was forced to choose its religion, and a majority of artists became unemployed and were asked to learn another trade, since painting was outlawed in Protestant Germany except for a privileged few. One of these, Lucas Cranach the Elder, was advised by his friend Martin Luther to develop a new kind of religious painting whose message would be the visual expression of Lutheranism. It raised dissimilarity (to Catholic painting) to the level of artistic theme. The German inscriptions and German portraits presented by, say, the Weimar Altar – where Luther and Cranach stand upright under the cross (Luther with the German-language Bible in his hand) – are examples of a new kind of art that was as much confessional as it was German. The art of painting, which before this time had been homogeneous throughout the German Empire, was thus split down the middle. With it, all innocence in the creative process was lost,



1. Lucas Cranach the Younger, *Weimar Altarpiece* (1555), church of St Peter and St Paul, Weimar. Cranach's great altarpiece at Weimar introduces a new iconography to the age-old crucifixion theme. It is, on the one hand a German iconography where two German compatriots, Luther and the painter (already deceased and painted here by his son), enter the biblical stage. On the other hand, the picture reveals the concept of the new Lutheran denomination, as it deconstructs the visual unity in order to build up a theological discourse rich in allegories.

for now it was the duty of art to represent the right faith. From now on, a German artist had to decide whether he would paint 'Catholic' or 'Protestant'. The Reformation, then, saw the birth of a divided German artistic tradition.

Many artists were happy to avoid religion altogether in their work, and went about employing classical themes. This, however, introduced a new problem to painting, for to paint secular themes was the same as painting 'Mediterranean'. It meant adopting the Italian style and practising it in a manner not quite as authentic as the Italians did. It was not long before 'Mediterranean' became synonymous with strange and anti-German. This divided the German visual arts tradition even further. Albrecht Dürer twice travelled south of the Alps with the intention of introducing Renaissance painting to Nuremberg. But once back home, he not only found himself facing a theoretical crisis – practising art in Germany required justification, even five hundred years ago – but an identity crisis as well. These problems are exemplified by Dürer's compulsive study of geometry, perspective and anatomy, on the one hand, and by his need to paint self-portraits on the other, as the art historian S. Gohr presented it in his wonderful essay about Germany's art history tradition. Not only did Dürer paint what has become one of the most famous self-portraits in all of art, he seems to have had a real psychological need to write books about subjects relating to the practice of the arts as well.

Much has been written about the decline in German art after Dürer, a development brought about by several factors, beginning with a decline in importance of the large centres of artistic activity in the Holy Roman Empire. Wolfgang Braunfels's large work *Kunst im heiligen römischen Reich deutscher Nation* (Art of the Holy Roman Empire *Nationis Germanicae*) gives a masterful description of how the Empire broke down into a collection of semi-independent principalities, a process fostered by

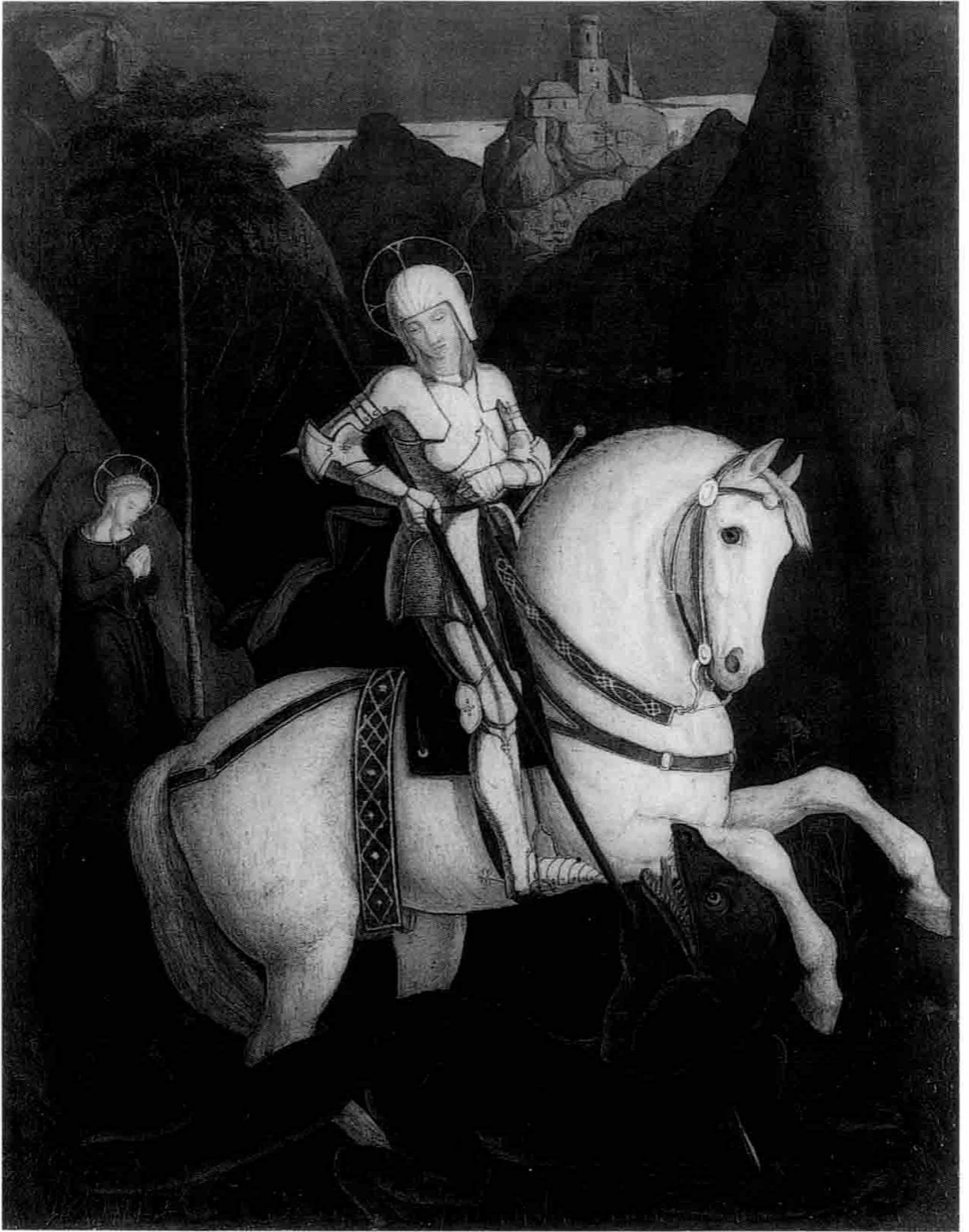


2. Anton Maron, *Johann Joachim Winckelmann* (1768), Schloßmuseum, Weimar. Winckelmann introduced a new type of art historical literature which exemplified the art of antiquity. He thereby created an ontological approach to art which was to shape the art appreciation of many generations to follow.

the Reformation and which splintered the arts, creating a form of regionalism. Political manoeuvring by the Habsburg dynasty focused on strengthening the empire's outer borders, and luring the best and brightest away from its heartland. In Spain, in the Spanish Netherlands and in the Prague of Rudolf II, Catholic themes were prized along with Italian painters. German artists were seldom represented in the collections of the period. In the art academies, the most important of which was the Paris Academy of Louis XIV, a powerful centre outside the empire established the ascendancy of the classical doctrine in the arts, in whose annals the Italians and the French might claim the greatest tradition. By comparison, Joachim von Sandrart's *Teutsche Academie* in Nuremberg was but a private school where an artist could learn to draw.

By the time art academies began to catch on in Germany in the eighteenth century, the ideals they taught were based on a cultural tradition that was anything but German. Soon the Romantics would be calling for artists to resist the 'foreign influence' of the academies, defiantly reminding everyone of the time of Dürer when, they said, German art was still one tradition – which, as we have seen, is only half true.

Before going on, as we knew they would, to rediscover their 'German nature', German artists first became enamoured with the culture of ancient Greece in the form of Johann Joachim Winckelmann, our greatest art historian. Born a Lutheran, Winckelmann so loved Greek culture that he converted to Catholicism in Dresden in order to receive a stipend that would send him to Rome in 1755. He admitted in a letter that he could never become a minister (Lutheran) nor a painter (of Catholic themes). Instead, he became a theologian of the (heathen) arts. Greece as we know it today did not exist then, and was perfectly suited to represent a utopian, pan-European artistic ideal. To imitate the antique culture of Greece meant



3. Franz Pforr, *St George and the Dragon* (c. 1809/10), Städelsches Institut, Frankfurt am Main. The revival of old German art, in resistance to the international fashion for classicism, also included the revival of medieval and Christian subject matter which looked more 'German' than Greek or Roman mythology and could be 'read' through the lens of romantic fairy tales.

to be free of all subsequent artistic traditions which, however, were exchanged for an unattainable philhellenic classicism that was even more inaccessible than any national tradition. During Winckelmann's time, Dresden was to the fine arts what Weimar was to German literature. His *Reflections on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture* was a plea for the imitation of an absolute ideal that could not seriously be imitated. Winckelmann challenges his readers to 'go to Athens'. But much of ancient Athens was in Dresden at the time, in the 'Ancient Marbles' collection of August the Strong who had taken it upon himself, as Winckelmann writes, 'to introduce the arts to Saxony as if they were a colony of immigrants'.

A generation after Winckelmann, there were further attempts in Dresden to develop a body of writing about German art, attempts aimed at emulating the French tradition and especially the *Salon* reviews by Diderot. One example can be found in the second volume of the Schlegel brothers' publication *Athenäum* which reports a discussion among German art aficionados during a tour of Dresden's art collection. It is a simulated discussion, of course, and targeted at German artistic sensibilities. How long the shadow of the Reformation must have been, even at this late date, for before Raphael's *Sistine Madonna* some of the participants were overcome by guilt for admiring a Catholic altar painting: 'You are in danger of converting to Catholicism', one of them warns the 'tour guide'. The only way out of this Catholic/Protestant mindset seemed to be a synthesis of art and religion, as in the works of the writers Novalis and Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder, to which the ongoing confessional fight in the arts would no longer apply and Catholic themes would simply disappear. Some artists were confused by this, and would convert to



4. Athena from the temple of Aphaia at Aigina, Glyptothek, Munich. Greek art, as the ultimate ideal of a timeless manifestation of the Greek soul, became the reason for undertaking excavations in Greece which were to provide German museums not just with ancient works of art but also with authentic art from the age of philosophy. The Bavarian activities in Greece, founded by Ludwig I were such excavations.

Catholicism just to be able to paint with an artistic innocence that they had supposedly lost.

The attraction of the German 'Romantic synthesis' was that it raised art to the level of belief, of faith. But this made disobedience to the theoretical dogma of classicism coming out of Paris almost inevitable, especially in the ongoing efforts to put the interpretation of art on a German footing. Not only were scholars now to see classical art with 'German eyes', but they were to portray German art as locked in a struggle for survival against what were then European standards. The Romantic movement in Germany, then, began as an intellectual revolt against the status quo, even though for a revolt it was a long drawn-out affair. It would not be until well after the Napoleonic occupation and the war of liberation that these ideals would inspire democratic revolt, in 1848, the dreams for which were quickly disappointed.

Long before that happened, though, alarms had gone off in Goethe's Weimar, where the publication *Weimarer Kunstfreunde* thundered against what it called the anachronism of 'an archaic, Christian-catholic artistic taste, that is literally forcing itself to go back to Early German sensibilities', and in doing so betraying the ideals of art. True, in his later years Goethe let himself be converted to Early Germanism in Heidelberg's *Palais Boissérée*, but he would have nothing to do with the *neudeutsche Kunst*, the 'new German art' which in his eyes could never be compared to the hard-won artistic concepts of Weimar classicism. Goethe, along with his artistic confidant Heinrich Meyer, would warn people about the dangers of religious-patriotic art as early as 1816, but they were unable to stop it from developing into a popular movement.

In that same year, Goethe had his thirty-year old manuscript of *Italian Travels* published, for what were basically the same reasons – to fulfill a mission concerned with the politics of art.

This entailed one more look at Rome to re-establish the true measure of great art. As a child of the Enlightenment, art was neither a German nor a personal matter for Goethe, but rather the expression of universal principles. Not much can be said about how the 1816 version of his *Travels* differs from what was originally written thirty years before, because he destroyed the older manuscript. However, the statement that he would not have wanted to stay in Rome to learn about art only for the sake of 'the merely introspective, the merely intellectual' sounds much more pertinent to 1816 than the early 1780s. 'Art is there to look at, not talk about' he writes. It is in this same section that the degrading term 'art gossip' first appears in this context.

Even Goethe, though, with his love for the visual image, was plagued by guilt at enjoying pictorial art as much as he did. He was just able to withstand the 'temptation of ownership' as he called it. He did not want to be the proverbial English gentleman buying up works of art right, left and centre, but preferred to understand art itself. He admonishes himself with 'I am not here to enjoy myself, or to follow the whims of fancy.' On the contrary. He was in Rome to 'educate' himself to the level of a cultured gentleman. Even the copies of ancient statues saved him from 'slipping back into barbarism', which was yet another of his references to the stereotypes about Germans in his time. He admired his friend, the painter August Tischbein for 'developing out of his own person, an expression that is completely and originally German'. In the person of Goethe we see combined two tendencies out of which two academic disciplines would later develop: the abstract philosophy of art, and empirical art history.

For most of his life, the cosmopolitan Goethe misunderstood the Romantic need for an artistic identity that could only be found by looking to one's cultural roots. On the other hand,

he came up with what was probably the best formulation, describing the process in the outline for an unfinished essay on German art. Here he writes that it would probably be impossible 'in any other nation' for 'artists to renounce all the advantages of an education in the arts' (meaning the classical canon) with the goal of returning to 'their mother's lap'. In a late supplement to *Italian Travels*, he accused the Romantics of a lack of self-confidence when 'turning to older, imperfect [forms]'. This was with reference to the search for cultural roots first undertaken by the Romantics, which would not reach its peak until the advent of the so-called *Primitivismus* movement a hundred years later. Even though modern techniques in painting had advanced in Goethe's time beyond those of the old masters, Romantic painters nonetheless looked to the latter for nature, and the natural, for characteristics that had not been subjected to academic principles, and had remained simple and innocent. In this they also wanted to discover their own identity – that could only be German and not Hellenic – in order to express it in their art, even if it meant contradicting the ideals of Weimar classicism.

Yet, Goethe himself was looking to nature and appeared to say something very similar to the Romantic position in his call for 'true and natural laws' in the arts, like those 'generated by the greatest of nature's wonders: those wonders that enrich the spirit and ultimately reveal to it the highest possible intuitive concept of nature and of art'. Intuitive maybe, but Goethe understood nature as governed by predetermined laws and because these had been revealed to the classical arts, he strove to conceptualize them. Goethe's *Urpflanze* or first plant was also a scholarly concept by which he might understand logical development in the natural world. Once he had done this, he could raise natural history to be the final authority in matters of art, to replace the laws governing what he saw as the

calamitous development of human history. To German Romantics, however, nature represented freedom, not law; freedom from the dictates of an artistic tradition that was not German, freedom from the norms of propriety and sophistication dictated by French culture. It also meant they were free to finally shake off the cold of a long German sleep, free to initiate a rebirth of the arts that would follow the founding of a new German nation.

It seems, then, that Goethe's opposition to the Romantics suggested a warning against looking for artistic renewal in religious-patriotic themes. The Romantic synthesis of art and religion had by that time reopened the old confessional wounds in German society, and would soon lead down a dead end. Patriotism would likewise fall into disrepute, unless it was hidden behind the winter landscapes and graveyard scenes of painters like Caspar David Friedrich. For a time, however, the two schools of thought provided for yet another *Bilderstreit* similar to the Reformation's – on the one side were the neo-Greeks, on the other the patriotic neo-Germans. Both believed in cultural rebirth. Both gave different names to ideals that were far removed from the real world. Extensive art collections in Dresden, where a generation earlier Winckelmann had discovered ancient Athens, made it one of the few places in Germany where a controversy over art would find protagonists among a wider public. For that reason, Goethe correctly predicted that Dresden would become the 'centre' where *neudeutsche* 'sentiments [could] be applied in practice'.

In *Italian Travels* Goethe warned the Germans to look to Rome, which he calls 'the capital city' meaning, of course, of the arts. In fact, a large contingent of German artists and writers were living south of the Alps at the time, the so-called *Deutschrömer*, and they were still an important voice in German intellectual circles. It was there, in the southern axis of the old



5. Caspar David Friedrich, *Monastery Cemetery in Winter* (1819), untraced. Friedrich became *the* painter of the Romantic German landscape. He also, however, expressed the feelings of hope or despair while viewing the German past at the ruins of a “past glory where resurrection would happen when the time was ripe for a new spring for the German people.”

Holy Roman Empire, that nostalgia for a pan-European culture continued to live on in the *Deutschrömer's* pious dedication to the classicism of ancient Greek and Rome, a dedication that would contribute much to the (admittedly late) entry of German culture into the modern era. Eventually ‘looking to Rome’ would take on a polemical tone as well because it excluded any look to Paris, then the capital of modern Europe and home to the artistic avant-garde. Most Germans knew of the Louvre through the travel diaries of literary figures like Friedrich Schlegel, who described hundreds of works of art there without illustrating a single one. Goethe was never in Paris, and asked his friend Wilhelm von Humboldt for news about its art scene.

In Berlin, a generation after the building of the Louvre, the *Altes Museum* (as it would later be called) opened with an amazingly thin collection of works purchased under the supervision of an aging von Humboldt. Construction work on the museum disturbed Hegel as he sifted through his library not far away, trying to put together a 'universal history of art'.

The German Romantic movement thus grew out of a cultural identity crisis. It was nurtured by the belief that German artists had missed centuries of development, and that they no longer possessed a form of expression to call their own. With no political tradition to fall back on, as in other European nations at the time, the Romantics began to clamour for *das Volk*, for a community of people who shared a common culture anchored in the distant past (see Helmut Plessner for more about this phenomenon). Calls for *das Volk* got even louder with the break up of the old Holy Roman Empire and the Napoleonic occupation. Beginning with the *Sturm und Drang* period, German literary arts acted as media for the ideals of a German *Kultur* that not only carried with it the seeds of opposition to French *civilization*, as the German sociologist Norbert Elias has pointed out, but which also saw itself as autonomous with German political and social reality in the nineteenth century.

Seen in this light, the lack of a tangible and unbroken German artistic tradition must have awakened in the Romantic heart a particularly intensive need for it. At the same time, the search for German identity that it inspired was doomed from the beginning by the exaggerated importance given to matters of ethnic identity. The one tradition that could have offered historical continuity in this respect had long ago ceased to play a role in the production of art – that golden age in which Raphael and Dürer, *Italia* and *Germania*, had reached their hands out to each other, and of which scholars and artists now fondly dreamed.

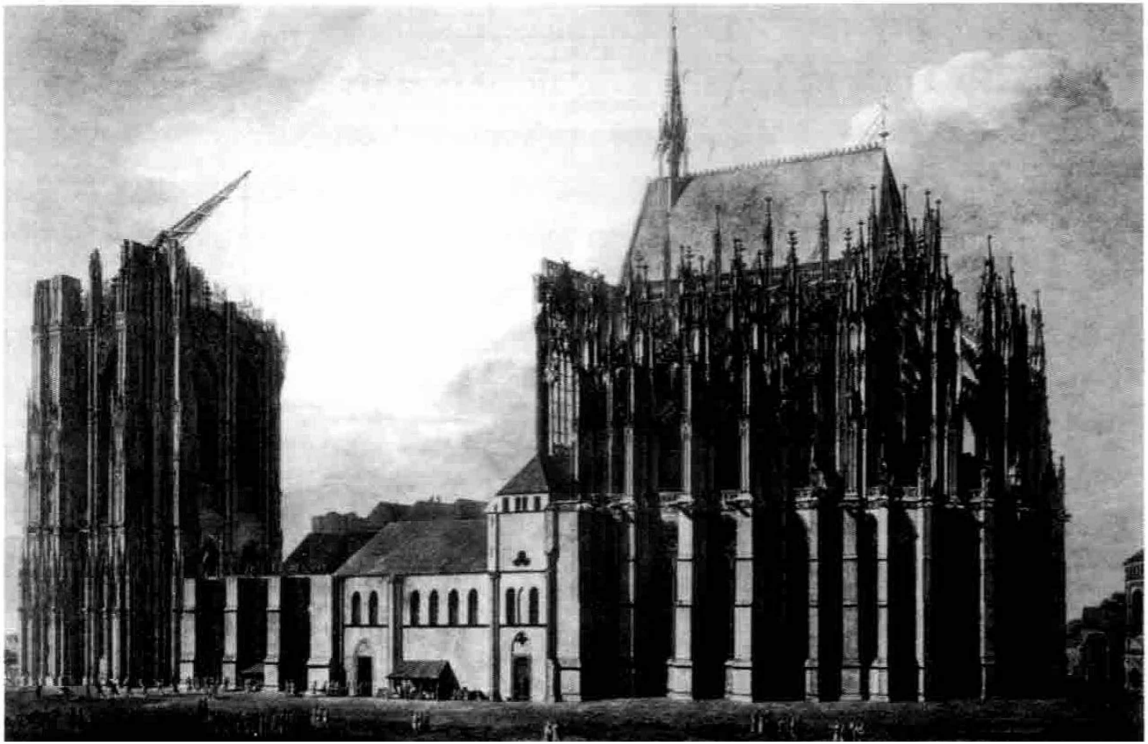
Art became important in the Romantic period because people wanted art to provide what the political reality of their times could not – a distinctive expression of that emotional affinity for nature that the Romantics saw in themselves and in the German people in general. The attempts by Romantic painters to portray German history and folklore through mystical visions are indication enough of this. After the mythological/allegorical iconography of classical antiquity had ceased to be important, landscape painting became the most popular genre of the period. Paintings depicting German wilderness scenes came to reflect an immortal ‘German nature’ that encompassed even the ruins of classical antiquity.

After the Napoleonic Wars, the search for German art took on a patriotic urgency. The writer and historian Josef Görres demanded that France return the German works of art it had confiscated during the Napoleonic occupation, describing them as ‘inalienable possessions of the [German] people’ even though there was no ‘German people’ at the time whose representatives might negotiate their return. Nor was there a centre, like Paris after 1789, that was representative of their collective culture. The national museums had yet to be built. They would mirror a completely different political geography, and completely different political ideas for that matter. Scholars began to focus, therefore, on the ancient buildings from the Gothic period, buildings that not only towered over those of the nineteenth century, but also represented historical continuity because they stood where German history had once been made, and where Germans still lived. Scholarship on the Gothic focused on a Germanic culture from the dawn of history, seducing many in the nineteenth century into believing that Gothic architecture had something to do with the ancient Goths. The Romantic cult of the ‘Gothic ruin’, which had begun even earlier in England, was not only a symbol in Germany for time which transcends history, and a symbol of

nature which outlasts all the works and days of man. The Gothic ruin was also a receptacle for the hope of a rebirth of past German greatness, 'And new life blossoms out of the ruins', as Friedrich Schiller formulated it in *Wilhelm Tell*.

When work began again on Cologne Cathedral in the mid-nineteenth century, no one bothered to point out that the giant Gothic torso was no ruin, but a building that had been left unfinished for centuries – a project that Germans had wanted to build, but had been unable to. Once again it was Görres who wrote that, to the Germans the unfinished cathedral was like having 'a reproach' constantly before your eyes. So it was that efforts to complete the cathedral came to symbolize the as yet unrealized dream of one German nation. Its tremendous size, its artistic brilliance that was the work of anonymous German artisans, made it seem predestined to be a national monument, one with which a reunited German people (to use a modern expression) could identify. But Prussia had different ideas. Prussia's conception of how the Second Reich should look triumphed over the Romantic ideal of *das Volk*, and work on Cologne Cathedral was carried out Prussia's way. Before this could be accomplished, however, scholars were to make a painful admission – that the cathedral owed the inspiration for its design to the French Gothic. Trains had long been steaming past the cathedral before the workers had finished carving Gothic forms in the sky above. There must have been a burning desire to complete a cathedral that had been left unfinished for six hundred years. Cologne Cathedral was the ideal choice, though, and its restoration provided a programme for monument restoration in later years.

Though the cult of the Gothic ruin seemed to offer at least the semblance of historical continuity on a political level, it was not a formulation that would hold up in the visual arts. The lustre of its retrospective ideals began to fade when they were



6. Cologne Cathedral, engraving 1809. The torso of Cologne cathedral was considered to be a symbol of the lack of unity in Germany. The completion of the cathedral seemed therefore to be a symbolic act, denoting the reunification of Germany. The Gothic style, in the same terms, was considered a German style, as it had been qualified by Renaissance historiography.

no longer applicable to a rapidly changing world; for an industrial society could not gather forever in front of neo-Gothic walls and paintings. The call went out for historical realism, which was brought to Germany by the Belgian school of historical painting. And while it is true that the movement was welcomed by a young Jacob Burckhardt, realism was a rather dangerous way to see the past. It presented images that might undermine the concept of an ideal, metaphysically understood history. The popularity of historical realism would not last long anyway and the illusions behind the Romantic ideal would vanish altogether after leaders of Imperial Germany began to entertain the unwarranted expectation that artists, when

contracted by the government, should serve a completely unromantic nationalism.

Painting done for private collectors, on the other hand, exhibited a strong German flavour when their subject was wilderness or domestic scenes. With the advent of *bürgerlicher Realismus*, the old Romantic motifs were transformed into realistic landscapes and interiors, motifs that urged the viewer to return to nature and the natural, and which also invited him to reject what was seen as an overly materialistic German society. However, the idyllic or pastoral scene, which dutifully perpetuated the old Romantic ideal, was incompatible with a French Impressionism that did not idealize nature, so that a bitter controversy broke out on that very subject in Germany. While some scholars and critics were ranting about the French being artistic nihilists, there were prudent minds who did realize that art had to become international, that it would have to transcend national parameters, if it was ever to become modern. Despite, or perhaps because of consensus on this, scholars were taken by surprise at the sudden appearance of a genuinely German modern artistic movement – Expressionism.

With the Expressionism of the *Wilden* movement, named in the spirit of a new *Sturm und Drang*, we see the return of the artist's individual voice, his personal vision, which by that time was thought to be a characteristic of German culture. The other option open to artists was abstraction. In Germany, as in other cultures, abstraction would promote a universal artistic ideal. One can speak of the late development of modern art in Germany in the same way that Helmut Plessner speaks of 'the belated nation' in describing the process by which the modern German nation became the last to form of the European great powers. The appeal to one's individual voice was the strength of the *Wilden* movement, but it carried with it the danger of constantly having to improve and change one's art. Before it

could be accepted in Germany, the modern movement had first to overcome the notion that the national German art tradition was opposed to it. Perhaps that is why it was so easy for the national socialists to punish its purveyors. By giving their works the degrading name of 'degenerate', the Nazis were able to portray modern art as being anti-German, as being somehow deformed by the false notion of being 'modern'. Once again, ideology had cast its long shadow over debates concerning the arts.

Perhaps the most important text about German art that I know does not directly address the subject – Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*. It was written shortly after the Sedan War and the founding of Imperial Germany, but stands in complete opposition to the ideals of both. Though Nietzsche's 'Dionysian frenzy' concerns, at least on the surface, Greek tragedy, it can also be read as an indirect reference to that which German art most lacked at the time – vitality and innocence. There is not enough fantasy, and too many 'visions' which possessed no real power. Sixteen years later in *Versuch einer Selbstkritik* (An Attempt at Self-criticism), which he placed as a preface to a reprint of *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche regrets having spoiled 'the Greek problem by mixing it with the most modern things'. However, he did not retreat from the tract's original purpose – to attack pedestrian morality and the German variant of Christianity for its complete lack of the 'Dionysian'. This was Nietzsche coming to terms with Romanticism, and with what he called a 'weary culture', which he sensed had long ago capitulated to the forces of nationalism, and which was now reduced to providing metaphysical solace.

Nietzsche did not spare what he called the 'socratic culture' of the sciences either. He writes that it is the 'inherent weakness of modern culture' that 'a theoretical man be terrified by

the consequences [of his own theories]'. When this situation comes about, 'a culture based on the principles of empirical science must fall'. Thus he dreamed of a science that would take the reigns of power itself, rather than leaving it to others. Art should do the same – it should assume a function in society, in the real world, instead of constantly bemoaning its own powerlessness. About the art of his own time, Nietzsche said that it revealed exactly this 'general affliction' – that it is too educated (Apollonian) and, for that reason, no longer possesses the (Dionysian) power to create out of the innocence of talent. The same holds true, he said, for the educated lover of contemporary art and literature 'who is basically a collector and corrector, pitifully blinded by book dust and misprints'. Nietzsche's 1871 tract was a revolt against a German culture that had become alienated from its own traditions. It would be seen a generation later by the modern avant-garde as a call to arms in a battle that promised a future for the arts in twentieth-century Germany.

I

New Questions, Old Answers

Music and literature are subjects in the German tradition, unlike the visual arts, which Germans have traditionally felt insecure dealing with. People have felt the need to defend the latter, even to justify research on the subject when there has really been no need to. By the visual arts, I mean of course architecture, sculpture and especially painting, about which scholars have wondered how German it really was in the past, or whether it would survive the advent of the modern movement with its strongly international character. These topics do not fall within the parameters of German history, regardless of how accustomed we are to the idea that ancient and pre-modern art represent images of historical portent. Perhaps they are forgotten topics too since few, if any, scholars are asking what 'German art' is these days; unless there is a controversy over assessing the role played by art scholarship in the Third Reich or the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), a process of investigation in which the protagonists are invariably confronted, to their infinite surprise, with the problem of defining German art. For many the time to pick up the topic of German art once again, a topic that has been ignored for so long by German scholars, seems to have come with unification.

The relationship the Germans have had with their own visual arts tradition has always been a troublesome one, and it is necessary to take a look at the history of this relationship to know what we are getting into. Art history has played a major role in this history, of course, especially when it seemed to say what people wanted to hear. For this reason, then, I propose to begin with a look at the art historian's hold on the subject before turning to the general public and the artists. I will have to limit my discussion at the start to the period before World War II, quite simply because the topic of western or 'Occidental art' (meaning European art in a western tradition), and not German art, has become the fashionable scholarly subject in the last fifty years in Germany. It is not my intention to describe the history of art history as if it is a discipline specific to the German tradition. Yet, scrutinizing the *study* of the visual arts in this way is unavoidable because critical scholarship before the war was a mirror that both captured the image and reflected the expectations of a wide audience represented by the educated classes.

'German art' as a topic for study was taboo for postwar German scholars. They studied individual artists or specific regions or periods, but nobody addressed it within the larger parameters of a shared German tradition. There were good reasons for this; the subject had become tainted, and art historians weren't the only ones who had abused it. Like all Germans after the war, scholars were anxious to replace their tainted identity with a new identity – preferably 'Occidental' rather than European, but under no circumstances 'German'. The question of national borders had become too controversial to address directly, in the sense that to do research as though north-western Poland was culturally German, as it had been for centuries before the war, would have been highly unacceptable. The division of

Germany meant that all of its eastern provinces had been, in a sense, lost. Art historians were no longer able, indeed no longer willing, to define their work within traditional geographical parameters. Better to ask what art is, than what German art is. For this line of inquiry, periodization becomes more popular than geographical considerations.

During the Cold War, art history in both East and West Germany ceased to possess a shared theoretical basis. West German scholars focused on the arts of their own territory; while the paintings, sculptures and historical monuments of East Germany were on the other side of a border that became almost impermeable. It was a division of Germany's cultural assets, as it were, one that had more than just practical consequences. For our heritage had been divided into two halves, each the possession of a different country, and what remained could not support a reasonable discourse on the subject as a whole. Scholarly contacts with 'the other side' were maintained, of course, but they were never sufficient to maintain enough of a basis to address the subject of a shared cultural tradition. To complicate matters further, West German scholars became enthusiastic 'Occidentalists', while their colleagues in the East worked in a country whose first decades saw all historical traditions except 'the workers movement' thrown into disrepute as right-wing nationalist- or capitalist-inspired. Two good examples of East Germany's early years in this respect would be the tearing down of the Berlin's Royal Castle or the banishment of the equestrian monument of Friedrich II to a corner of Sanssouci gardens.

German art, then, was not at the top of the agenda on either side. East Germany would eventually discover what it saw as its 'own' Prussian heritage, but the fact remains that its art historians were forced to toe the party line (there was much resistance to this) and the teaching of art history was drastically cut

back at universities because it was seen by the government as unimportant to the development of socialist society. With reunification, the historical monuments and museums of the former GDR are once again available to those in the West for study. They represent cultural assets not welcomed by every scholar, at least not by those for whom German art was no longer a topic of serious study.

As a specialized discipline, art history was easily adapted to the parameters of European art because, strictly speaking, art had always been synonymous with European art. No special 'European' concept need be developed to justify discussions of an artistic tradition that raised no doubts regarding nationality. The same was true of European history, the cycles of which embrace an epoch stretching from classic antiquity to the modern period. Seen this way, 'Europe' is a geographical entity within which the cycles of European cultural history played themselves out in a way tangibly represented by artistic achievement. As will be seen, within this 'entity' German art has always been problematic, and it was a relief for German scholars to be able to study European art instead.

It is a strange coincidence indeed that the final steps towards a united Europe coincide with German unification, for which we were mentally unprepared. While the Germans are looking inward in an effort to redefine themselves as a nation, our politicians are looking outward and assuring our neighbours that the mistakes made in the past by an undivided German state will never be repeated. But a third factor comes into play here as well: our 'new Europe' not only includes the former GDR, the Iron Curtain has also fallen. Looming on the horizon is Eastern Europe, which we separated from 'our' Europe with no qualms whatsoever after the war. Eastern Europe, where the above-mentioned cycles of cultural history

occurred in a completely different time frame or not at all, might as well have been on another planet. As we stand on the verge of a united Europe, then, our comfortable definitions of what that 'Europe' is have been shattered. Shattered because we have made our culture synonymous with the notion of a utopian Occident, whose geographical parameters are identical to those of western European nations that form the heart of the EEC, and who signed the Treaties of Rome.

The concept of 'the Occident' was the historical model for the political restoration of western Europe after the war, which was premised on the existence of the eastern block. As a consequence, Russian art was a subject of serious study for East German art historians, much less for those in West Germany, while Italian art eventually became an exotic subject to study in the East. The art of central and eastern Germany, to which western scholarship no longer had access, became subjects for refugees and an occasion for nostalgia. In West Germany, the picture of the Middle Ages could finally be brought up to date to show that it was a western European phenomenon.

If I focus only on the part played by art history, then there is no current answer to the question 'what is German art?' The past does not provide an answer either, at least not a sufficient one. It is exactly this dilemma that I now wish to address. Two large concepts that have little to do with each other thematically, have helped to create this dearth in the study of German art. The first concept used the subject of German art to promote the nineteenth-century 'myth of the nation'. The second is 'Occidental art' which has served to support the new myth of a reunited Occident in the second half of the twentieth century. The older of the two concepts, with its nationalist overtones, belongs to the period during which art history as a discipline came into existence. German Romantics searched for

the meaning of art in national identity, and believed a nation's identity should be reflected by its art. The gulf between the abstract cultural notion of *das Volk* and true nationhood was easily bridged as soon as the *Zeitgeist* clamoured for it. The nineteenth-century push towards a single nation for all Germans demanded the foundation of national museums and resulted in the scholarly postulate of a 'national school' of art. But giving the arts a national identity was difficult. On the other hand, the concept of an Occidental culture, as a general paradigm, was not usually supported by scholarly research until after World War II.

Perhaps more than any other part of Europe, Germany was literally torn asunder by the Reformation, the ramifications of which were still felt in the Romantic period's call for 'one nation'. Confessional or denominational division was one of the reasons behind their push to bring together all German principalities under one flag. It was not inspired by lofty democratic ideals alone. Ever since then, and always in a different context, we find two very different kinds of Germans competing against each other for the moral and intellectual upper ground, as though strife itself defined our national identity. Since the Reformation there have also been two distinct kinds of German art, but during the Middle Ages there was still a single tradition with one religion. The term Catholic did not possess the meaning it has now, since the word Protestant did not exist.

During the Reformation art literally became a question of faith, its function to serve religion. In the early years, artists suffered in the Protestant areas of Germany where the newly created secular art collections could not, by any means, provide them with long-term compensation for the loss of ecclesiastical commissions from a generous Catholic church. In such an

atmosphere, it wasn't long before art looked either Catholic or Protestant, rather than German – unless one identified Protestant with German art and mistrusted Catholic art as foreign (a distinction strangely similar to the modern notion of national and international art). Indeed, its not having taken part in the 'true' Renaissance of Catholic Italy had already robbed German artists of their innocence, and confessional division made it even worse. The wider German art community, however – which in the modern age was made up mostly of Protestant academics – could not hide the difficulty it had in simply enjoying art, a deficiency that could only be overcome by theoretical discourse on the subject. So not only has German art been divided since the Reformation, but art discourse in general, with its insistence on the purely theoretical, betrays a prejudice that can be seen as a particularly German trait. Perhaps this is why defining what 'real' German art is has always been accompanied by controversy. Even to this day it makes tempers flare here. The only way to avoid this seemed to be the solution offered by Goethe's *Italian Travels* – to seek to define the principles of art, preferably in the realm of abstract ideas where the question of German traits did not present itself.

How scholarly assessments of German art were used and abused before World War II left bad memories in its wake. These assessments either suffered from a lack of self-assurance when dealing with German art, or they knew exactly what it was, neither of which helped clarify the matter. Authors felt a real need to convince themselves, or to convince a readership whom they saw labouring under a misconception of one kind or another. In the introduction to his 1935 book *Kunst der deutschen Kaiserzeit* (The Art of Imperial Germany), the German art historian Wilhelm Pinder warns his readers of a sort of crisis of self-confidence that he saw preventing Germans from liking their own art. 'An inferiority complex is at work here' he

writes, one that all too easily sees what is truly German as 'deformed' or 'degenerate'. Pinder was not only referring to the Nazis, from whom he carefully distances himself, but also to a *Deutsch-National* tradition that was at odds with history.

An important circumstance that Pinder mentions concerned the perception of art. German art historians, he writes, should 'first learn the method of seeing from Italian art'. They suffer from having only one Dürer, but no Raphael and no Michelangelo to look at. For this reason, German art historians must first be true to 'our own visual arts tradition', which represents 'a singular species all its own within the phylum of European art'. Antiquity, like the Renaissance, took place outside of Germany proper, and classicism was never German. Nevertheless, Pinder says that national characteristics can be found in art, and these demand an aesthetic willing to focus on that particular idiom.

II

Searching for the German Style *Perceptions of the Gothic in the Romantic Period*

Germans were stigmatized as ‘artistic barbarians’ as early as the eighteenth century. We find a reaction against this in the writings of young Goethe, specifically in *Erwin von Steinbach*, a tract concerning the architect thought to be responsible for designing the west façade of Strasbourg Cathedral, which Goethe had visited in 1772. ‘What has made you hold such a building in disdain?’ he asks the French and the Italians. He wants to finally do justice to ‘a people whom the whole world calls barbaric’. He is furious at German art critics for not ‘being able to proclaim to the whole world that this is German architecture, our architecture’, and instead have belittled the cathedral ‘with the misconstrued name of “Gothic”’. But was the name Gothic really misconstrued?

Writings about the history of art as far back as the Renaissance had, in fact, fostered the cliché that the Germans were ‘artistic barbarians’. It was a well-founded truth for Giorgio Vasari who, for example, attributed the ‘unclassical’ Gothic structures in Italy to foreigners, tracing the style back to the ancient Goths rather than the French. In his *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters and Sculptors*, first published in 1550, he writes:



7. Strasbourg Cathedral, west façade (1277–1439). The young Goethe admired the spirit of the great German architect Erwin von Steinbach when he saw Strasbourg Cathedral. He saw the building as convincing proof that the claim of German barbarism, in terms of art, was unjustified.

‘After that there followed other architects who brought from their barbaric homelands that manner of building which today we call German. They constructed buildings that . . . appear ludicrous to our modern tastes.’ Needless to say, German Romantics were proud to accept Vasari’s condescending judgement. It inspired one of their number, Friedrich Schlegel, to write in his *Grundzüge der gotischen Baukunst* (Fundamental Characteristics of Gothic Architecture) that it was precisely with the advent of the Goths that ‘the dominant influence of the Germanic tribe and German disposition in . . . the art of poesy’ began. The characteristic feature of the ‘style of this new kind of architecture’ he writes, is ‘a most audacious fantasy’ combined with a ‘German affinity for nature’, and it is therefore ‘rightly called Gothic’.

However, it was one thing for the Romantics to identify with the Gothic as a German style of architecture, but something else again to evoke the German culture of their time as a defense against the accusation of being a barbarian. Was it not precisely through *Kultur* that the Germans distinguished themselves as a people from the *civilisation* of the French? But ‘culture’ as such contained so much of the classical, and so little of the German, that scholars were constantly asking whether there was such a thing as a German culture, or whether it had yet to develop. Nietzsche spoke of the ‘hope for a culture yet to develop’, for a nation of people that ‘at present, has none’. While it is true that Germans were proud of their culture, they were constantly doubting its worth and always struggling ‘to become something’. Doubts occurred where the artistic ‘sense of form’ seemed under-developed, prompting Nietzsche to write of the Germans in *Untimely Observations*: ‘They’ve already grasped the meaning of art. They are, after all, a people famous for their *Innerlichkeit*.’

Romantics everywhere in Europe clamoured for art in a

patriotic vein and with a national character. But in Germany, Romanticism does not present a particularly innocent picture, for in the wake of liberation from Napoleonic occupation it became more a political than a literary/artistic movement. It wasn't enough to have retrieved German works of art from the French. The art of France and its revolutionary ideals were portrayed as essentially different from, even opposed to, the German way and the German affinity to nature. In fact, the German elite had already articulated their discontentment at the definitions of art they had read about in Italian and French sources, which were just about the only sources open to them at the time. These feelings were articulated by the Romantic poets August-Wilhelm and Caroline Schlegel in a discussion concerning the paintings in the Dresden museum that was published in *Athenaeum* in 1799. The Schlegels report that, as their small group of art connoisseurs finally got through the museum's huge collection of Italian works, and stood together before a painting by Hans Holbein, one of the group wondered seriously about what might have happened had the Renaissance never occurred. 'It always makes me sad', he goes on, 'to know there was a time when we were on our way to developing our own artistic tradition, and adverse circumstances, and an addiction to anything that was foreign, prevented it.'

After viewing Early German and Dutch paintings on his way home from Paris in 1804, Friedrich Schlegel would call for the creation of a 'collection of Early German paintings' whose positive influence he was sure would lead to a renewal of the visual arts. The question on everyone's mind at the time, however, was whether in the long run German painters could ever do justice to artistic definitions and interpretations as they had been formulated during and prior to the Romantic period. Thus Schlegel's protest that 'early German painters were no less important or inventive', but that 'our ignorance of their impor-

tance prevents us from accepting them as such'. He goes on to say that the importance of Early German painters can only be measured if we are first able to judge the figures in their paintings, not just according to the classical ideal, but also according to 'how their faces express individual character and nationality'. This would, of course – since it was so important to Schlegel the Romantic – include the animated expressions of Dürer's figures, who 'grasped the German national character'.

But for Schlegel's contemporaries, all of them educated in the classical-humanist tradition, renewing the visual arts via Early German painting did not represent a real chance to break out of the dilemma of defining a German artistic tradition that possessed little or no interpretive basis, and the advocating of which seemed to entail a rejection of the aesthetic values they held most dear. In an 1817 attack on what it called the 'new German patriotic arts', Goethe's confidant Heinrich Meyer accused writers Ludwig Tieck and Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder of mixing 'that thing called religion, with that thing called painting' in order to dispute the 'long-established rules of understanding art' traditionally taught by academics. Even Johann David Passavant, who as a painter of the Nazarene School would later become director of the *Städel'sche Kunstinstitut* in Frankfurt, spoke out in his 1820 book *Ansichten über die bildenden Künste* (Reflections on the Fine Arts) against the dressing-up of the Early German style in the new German-patriotic style. Early German art is, he admits, an 'inspiration' but it is not suitable to 'superficial imitation'. Only in Gothic architecture could the criteria for a truly German art form be found.

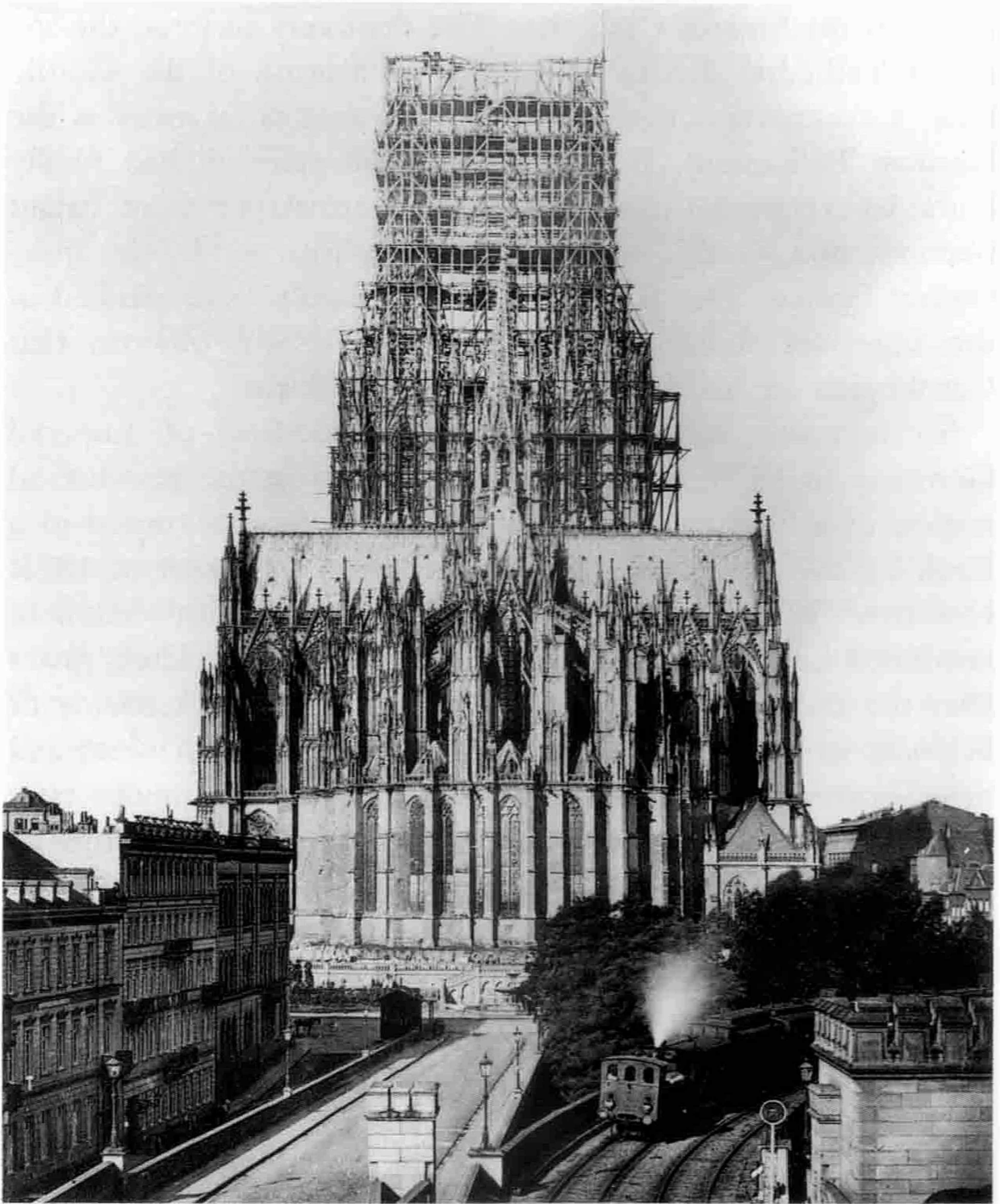
In the early nineteenth century work was taken up again on Cologne Cathedral, a Gothic structure that the Middle Ages

had been unable to complete. In 1814 Josef Görres saw this building as 'a symbol of the new empire we want to build'. The unpopular Holy Roman Empire *Nationis Germanicae* had collapsed eight years earlier and Görres, a Catholic from the Rhineland, saw no reason to support the new (Protestant) nation-state of royal Prussia. But efforts to complete Cologne Cathedral also promised a historical link between German contemporary art and the Middle Ages, that golden age of Empire and German art — as if the Renaissance were but an intermezzo. But the lingering effects of the Reformation, the unresolved strife between Protestant and Catholic, prevented any hope for consensus. In a speech at Cologne Cathedral in 1842, J. Schäffer described the atmosphere of confessional division as 'Enthusiasm of the faithful for religion, enthusiasm of atheists for German art.' A photograph taken in 1880 shows how sharp the contrasts of those days were. Cologne's half-built Medieval west towers, seemingly frozen in time, are covered by scaffolding, while a train steams past below.

The cathedral was finally completed and opened with a festive dedication ceremony in 1880, over six hundred years after its cornerstone had been laid. And though there was once again a united German Empire under the leadership of Prussia, it was so split by a bitter *Kulturkampf* that Catholic politicians were not allowed to attend the dedication of the Catholic cathedral, politicians such as August Reichensperger, a *vaterlandsloser Ultramontane*, a derisive term applied to Roman Catholics who were supposed to have Papist leanings, and who were being persecuted at the time by Imperial Prussia for being anti-German. So in the end, Cologne Cathedral did not become, as Görres had hoped, a 'monument to German unity'.

Pride over the Gothic allegedly belonging to the German architectural tradition had also been considerably dented by the discovery that Cologne Cathedral was dependent for many of

Searching for the German Style



8. Cologne Cathedral, choir, photograph 1880. The new railway was already passing while the Gothic cathedral of Cologne was still under construction. The idea was to create a national monument, symbolizing German history but the Prussian kings redefined the nation when they finally inaugurated the completed cathedral in the Wilhelminian empire. The monument of stone, however, promised to mark the site where German history could happen again.

its forms on Amiens Cathedral. The discovery inspired the so-called 'cathedral debate' about the wellspring of the Gothic style, a controversy that would cause waves as far away as the German Parliament. Just when German scholars had finally come to accept the classicism of the Renaissance as an Italian phenomenon, Gothic was snatched away too, and by the arch-enemy France. The Romanesque had hardly been studied at the time, let alone the Ottonian, and it was obvious that Carolingian art had been a pan-European form.

So it came about that after the founding of Imperial Germany in 1870, scholars became fixated in the paradoxical notion of a 'German Renaissance', an expression coined in a book by the art historian Wilhelm Lübke way back in 1873. Heinrich Wölfflin, who taught art history in Munich, reminded his audience of this book in a formal address given after the outbreak of World War I at the Royal Academy of Sciences in 1914: 'After the war in 1870 had been won, and the German people had begun to adjust to life in the new Reich, a kind of art was discovered in German architecture of the sixteenth century that . . . seemed to possess just those characteristics that the times called for. German traits were synonymous with German Renaissance.'

III

Art Historians and the 'German Question'

It soon became clear that things were not going to be as easy as that. Scholars discovered this when they began looking for a model for German art in the Renaissance. The argument that there was a characteristically German architectural style in the sixteenth century is not entirely convincing, even though there is a certain degree of divergence between it and Italian Renaissance architecture. It made more sense to identify as 'German Renaissance' the visual arts of the period in which Dürer was active, a period during which themes of the Reformation played a major role as well. But to do so would have contradicted the common definition of the Renaissance as an Italian phenomenon. That is, unless the so-called German Renaissance is seen as having occurred in opposition to the Renaissance as it is normally understood – which German art historians began doing in the years after Wölfflin's speech. But while there seemed to be an 'Early German' manner in secular paintings of the Reformation, a time in which the German wilderness was a major motif, it was not pervasive enough for scholars to see it as the defining style of the period.

It therefore seemed to make sense to search, not for a particular style to categorize as German, but to search for 'the

German' in every style. The art historian Kurt Gerstenberg became famous for employing this method of research in his 1913 book concerning the *Deutsche Sondergotik* (The German Special Gothic). If the Gothic was not German, or so Gerstenberg's theory goes, there was nonetheless a process by which the French Gothic had been 'Germanized', and this process revealed just those characteristics scholars were looking for. Hence Gerstenberg's subtitle 'An examination of the essential characteristics of German architecture during the Late Middle Ages'.

In his address to the Academy of Sciences in Munich, given a year after Gerstenberg's book was published, Wölfflin seemed to be looking for a balance between that which changes from one stylistic period to the next, and that which remains the same, which he cloaks in the oft-used 1914 concept of 'national characteristics'. He went on to say that 'Each of the various stylistic periods in the history of art possesses its own special physiognomy. National individuality, on the other hand, seems to a certain degree to be something consistently homogenous, something that does not change despite the development of one stylistic period into another.' Scholars should be looking for the 'essence' of art, which Wölfflin calls 'national fantasy'.

Wölfflin was to return again and again to the topic of German art as it relates to the art of the Italian Renaissance. It turns up at the beginning of his career, in his book of 1899, which took classical art in Italy as its subject, a topic Germans have always perceived as outside their own artistic tradition. Perhaps the book was inspired by the fact that northern Europeans, most of us at least, are enchanted with the south. Dürer's enchantment with the beauty of Venice, which he saw for the first time in 1494, can be seen in the composition of his 1498 self-portrait



9. Albrecht Dürer, *Self-portrait* (1498), Prado, Madrid. In the nineteenth century Dürer was celebrated as the German artist *par excellence* and considered a representative of German identity. He seemed to incorporate what had been lost, a strong character and a loyalty to his native city and its burghers. Dürer celebrations reached a climax in 1828, the 300th anniversary of his death. Around 1900 his travels to Venice came under discussion as a possible danger to his status as a wholly German artist.

– with the half figure of the artist placed before a landscape window, obviously an Italian motif. Many artists who followed after this greatest of German artists would be evaluated according to how many precepts of the Italian Renaissance they had been willing to assimilate. Wölfflin's third book in 1905 reads like an expanded version of his first. Bearing the title *Die Kunst Albrecht Dürers* (The Art of Albrecht Dürer) it raises what was the pressing question of his day – how to go about identifying a truly German style in the arts. The author draws a careful picture of Dürer, whom he considers a moderate classicist, but whom he nonetheless defended against clichés propagated by the German 'national school' of art history. Wölfflin vehemently opposed their accusation that Dürer 'betrayed his in-born German character to the cult of the Italian form'. It is simply wrong to set Grünewald's 'German manner' at one end of the stylistic spectrum, and Dürer's 'degenerate manner' at the other, then maintain that 'Dürer was not German enough'. It was much more probable, writes Wölfflin, that Dürer's 'craving for Italy was caused by completely healthy sentiments'.

The concept of 'degeneracy' had long been in use in the medical field by 1905, but mostly in reference to mentally ill individuals. Applied to art, 'degeneracy' had been in use but a short time. First to apply the term within an artistic framework was the German cultural critic Max Nordau in the 1893 book *Degeneration*, which attempts a psychological diagnosis of contemporary (i.e. modern) artists with the purpose of separating the 'healthy' ones from the 'diseased' ones. Wölfflin was not concerned with modern art in his book, but with a German 'manner' in art that he wanted to reconcile with the classicism of Renaissance Italy. His 1931 book *Italien und das deutsche Formgefühl* (Italy and the German Sense of Form) attempted a synthesis of the two themes that had concerned him for his

entire life. In his autobiography, he says this synthesis was preceded by 'a slow detachment from Italian [Renaissance] ideals'. As early as 1922, he had wanted to 'come to terms with our own art' and that was why he was fascinated by what he called the 'difficult' topic of 'a national character'. At a congress for art historians in 1936, he would say that the historian must 'find the creative principles behind national characteristics' even if 'the highest principles of art do not coincide with the merely national'. In the end, Wölfflin chose a diplomatic position on the 'German question' because under no circumstances was he willing to take a stand against the Renaissance.

Not so his contemporary Georg Dehio, who outlined a systematic analysis of German traits in the visual arts in a 1907 essay entitled *Deutsche Kunstgeschichte und Deutsche Geschichte* (German Art History and German History). An ethnic German from the Baltic town of Reval, Dehio had been teaching since 1892 at the Deutsche Universität in Strasbourg, which had become part of Imperial Germany after Sedan – the same place Goethe had searched for the German soul over a hundred years earlier. In 1915 Dehio published the first volume of his *Geschichte der deutschen Kunst* (The History of German Art), the only book on this theme to become a classic in the field. In the essay eight years earlier, he had mentioned the need for just such a book, one 'that we don't have, but should have'. Dehio's *opus* addresses the first golden age of German fine arts under the reign of the House of Hohenstaufen, which was followed by yet another golden age in the fifteenth century. He goes on, 'Then in the sixteenth century, after a short period of greatness, came the catastrophe from which German art and architecture never completely recovered.' This catastrophe was a second confrontation with classical antiquity in the Renaissance which, Dehio writes, was German art's 'undoing'.

By the time Dehio had written these words, Imperial

German society expected its art historians to defend a German artistic ideal that was not watered down by foreign influence. The Middle Ages, the period of German Kaisers and cathedrals, got the most attention at the time, and by no means was it because of a love of art alone. It was not Dehio's intention, for example, to write 'art history in its strictest sense'. He had the greatness of German history in mind, history attested to by 'monuments of art, in the sense that they reveal conditions of the national soul and bring secrets to light, which no other kind of historical source would be capable of expressing'. When Europe's borders had to be redrawn again in 1918, the Romantic 'myth of the nation' inherited from the nineteenth century became even more important in Germany because it alone promised continuity amidst historical upheaval.

What was perceived as an unjust defeat in 1918 gave an even sharper edge to the discussion about German-ness and art. A good example of this was a 1920 article of appreciation for the works of Georg Dehio by Wilhelm Pinder in the magazine *Kunstchronik*. Dehio, the article said

is a Baltic German who has given us so much . . . the Baltic peoples we've had to give up, probably forever. His influence was felt from Strasbourg, where he lived and worked for twenty-six years. . . . Strasbourg has been lost as well, perhaps forever. In 1918 the French wanted to let the creator of this institute [at the Deutsche Universität] walk alone over the Rhine with a suitcase in his hand while suffering cries of abuse from a paid rabble . . . and his beautiful institute will remain abandoned as long the French continue to make it illegal even to look upon anything that was ever German.

We must admit that after World War I, French and German art historians had pretty much the same attitudes about



10. Uta von Ballenstedt, west choir, Naumburg Cathedral, after 1249
Between the wars, medieval art in Germany, especially the Bamberg ride and the donor statues in Naumburg cathedral, represented the nostalgia for a great past and promised the continuity of unchallenged ideals and German integrity. Influenced by her image in stone, many girls were baptised with the name of Uta during this period.

nationalism in the arts, and that the Frenchman Emile Mâle played a less than praiseworthy role in the controversy between the two. At the same time, I must emphasize that serious German art historians of that time certainly behaved as responsible scholars of their own tradition. The relevant literature is concerned with style, and with form of expression in works of art, seldom with overtly political issues. This kind of thing did not sully the discipline at this point in time, as it later would. Nevertheless, the supposedly innocent line of thought always seemed to serve the hidden agenda of defending German art, leaving very little room for disagreement in the process. We find much of what could easily pass as intolerance for those who happen to disagree. Celebrated scholars seemed willing to fulfill society's expectations, especially when the chance to prove their patriotism presented itself. Their methods of argument were basically the same ones used by most German scholars working in the humanities at the time. They practiced the holistic approach based on the need to explain conclusively everything within one's field of study, and to acquire adherents who would believe these theories without question.

In 1935 Wilhelm Pinder published *Kunst der deutschen Kaiserzeit bis zum Ende der staufischen Klassik* (Art of the Medieval German Empire Including the Hohenstanfen Age). The preface offers the picture of a man walking a fine line. On the one hand, he believes it is 'unavoidable' that German art history is 'currently being rewritten', but on the other hand he warns of losing too much of the best works already attributed to the German tradition in the process. He declares that once again 'in this book' the subject is 'German self-confidence in dealing with history' and their doubts about it. He wants to 'be allowed to say a proud yes' to German art and to celebrate its greatness, leading him to proclaim that 'There really are things in the

visual arts tradition of Europe that were discovered by the Germans and by them alone.' This sounds like the same need for justification, like the same uneasiness in dealing with the topic, that had obviously accompanied the problem of defining German art from the beginning.

Pinder would follow Wölfflin as head of the art history department at the University of Munich in 1927. He must have begun writing the multi-volume *Von Wesen und Werden deutscher Formen. Geschichtliche Betrachtungen* (A Historical Look at the Essence and Development of German Forms) not long after his appointment, since the first volume (mentioned above) appeared in 1935. In the preface, Pinder differentiates his study from 'Dehio's great achievement', which was how the book was seen by then, by writing that 'The goal [of my work] is not the usual enumeration of [the history of art], but the necessity of *today's* interpretation of it.' He goes on to say that 'a situation' has arisen 'which Dehio did not have to face'. Pinder will devote less space to that which has already been recognized as German, and more space to that which is still 'controversial' and which has to be 'defended'. These included the Carolingian, Ottonian and even Salian 'styles' which were not yet fully recognized as being part of the German tradition. It was 'Not breadth of fact' that determined what he would focus on 'but its degree of controversy'.

For a time after 1933 Pinder, like many of his fellow scholars, offered his services to the national socialists in the hope of restraining their *Kulturpolitik* and exerting a moderate influence on them. Yet, even though he initially sympathized with their calls for a renewal of German culture, it is nonetheless clear that Pinder's personal goal was to usher in 'a new Middle Ages' in which 'mankind will be refined and live with style'. For Pinder, style was representative of more than just form. In reality it represented 'community and belief'.



11. *Angel with Millstone*, Ottonian miniature from The Bamberg Apocalypse, Bamberg Cathedral archives. Ottonian art, different from Carolingian art, was welcomed as an indigenous German creation. In the heydays of modern Expressionism, Ottonian figural art seemed to represent the archetypes of an inborn German predisposition for an expressionistic style. This early Expressionism was thought to convey character and idealism.

Common to the early years of the modern movement was the belief that a revolutionary kind of artistic style was just over the horizon. Pinder, however, imagined that this new style would be German, and in doing so isolated himself from the progressive *credo* espoused by modern art, which had always seen itself as an international movement. By conjuring up *das Volk*, Pinder was in fact reiterating a dream of the Romantic period, a dream that admittedly was being used by German nationalists to radicalize the zeitgeist of those dark years.

Pinder's attempt ran into problems when he focused on the eastern parts of Germany, then still part of the Reich – in this case one cannot invoke a common German tradition without qualifying it. He remedied this with the astounding formulation that the Slavic tribes in these areas 'occupied the domiciles abandoned by our ancient Germanic ancestors. . . . When they were reconquered [by the Teutonic Order in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries], this created a second Germany . . . at first a colonial area, which after much fighting gradually fused with the rest of the Empire.' Pinder then feels free to include these eastern areas into what he calls a German *Volksraum*, a cultural delineation that he differentiates from the geographical entity that was the German nation, with its fluctuating borders. One of the goals of Pinder's book was to save the German patriotic tradition from its insipid radicalization by the national socialists, and to keep the study of German art, especially sculpture, on a scholarly level based on methodological principles of interpretation. No wonder his book, unedited, would be reprinted and eagerly read in 1952, a time when books dealing with this topic were no longer being written in Germany. Pinder offered postwar scholars a vocabulary to describe what they themselves were no longer willing to describe. At that time, then, our topic drops out of sight until the present day. It is very

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important, however, not to forget the large gap between then and now.

It has not been my purpose here to diminish Pinder's brilliant achievements as a critic of sculpture, but rather to show the position he took when interpreting German art, and the place he occupies in its historiography. We cannot simply pick up the subject where he left off, and proceed as though it had no history prior to that.

IV

Resistance to the Modern Movement in Germany

German art was being defended on another front during these same years, this time against the dangers of international modernism. Wilhelm Pinder is uneasy about the subject in the preface of the first volume of his 'history' in 1935. 'The notion of "the modern"' he writes, 'is not a concept that applies to art at all' but to the fields of 'technology, of fashion'. As far back as the Middle Ages, he writes, the less a German artist was willing to imitate new European stylistic movements, the more German his works were; 'To be *unmodern*' he concludes, 'does not mean to be *left behind*.'

Resistance to the modern movement was not by any means confined to Germany, but here the anti-modernists perceived modern art to be a threat to the very heart and soul of what it meant to be German. To them, the 'foreign' avant-garde, at least when it came from France, seemed to endanger the very nature of our German-ness; as if German art would lose sight of its cultural roots were it to allow itself to become modern. Debate about 'the modern' was especially heated in Imperial Germany during the years 1870 to 1918, and it always seemed to be concerned with the question of German cultural identity. The writer Julius Langbehn gave expression to the general

contempt many scholars felt for the modern movement in his 1890 book *Rembrandt als Erzieher* (Rembrandt as Teacher) which bore the interesting subtitle 'by a German'. Once again an artist was needed whose work expressed German ideals. This time it was Rembrandt, whom the author did not hesitate to identify as German. But Langbehn was less concerned with art than he was with crusading against what he saw as the immoral materialism of Imperial Germany. Hence his call for a 'spiritual rebirth' which had yet to occur after the 'political rebirth' of Germany in 1870. The modern movement, Langbehn writes, had corrupted general notions of morality, a development that he would have liked to reverse.

Even the Kaiser expected art to provide moral guidance to society, expected art to awaken feelings of pride and patriotism in his people, and to bring about that hoped-for consensus which had yet to become a reality in his newly-founded empire. In fact, this became the official line taken by Imperial Germany in 1901, when Wilhelm II opened the *Siegesallee* in Berlin. The government expected *Kunst im Dienst der Staatsidee* (Art in Service to the Nation) – as Georg Malkowsky's 1912 book formulated it – but it was an ideal that contemporary German artists did not share with their ruler, at least not willingly. This attitude prompted Wilhelm II to denounce modern art, saying that it 'does nothing more than portray misery as being even more loathsome than it is', and 'in doing so, sins against the German people'. This was even more incomprehensible to the Kaiser, 'since we, the German people, have made great ideals part of the public good, while these same ideals have disappeared more or less from other nations'.

The shadow that would eventually fall upon the arts was already forming at this early date. German uncertainty about its own tradition required a demarcation, which fostered an intellectual isolationism that eventually went so far as to deny the

existence of a modern movement altogether. This phenomenon becomes relevant to our theme in those cases where the anti-modernists of those years advised artists to look to German art of the past for models to imitate. For them, modern art was as un-German as the Gothic and the Renaissance, which art historians would have so liked to define as German. If the world was not willing to give German art its due, then all that was left was a retreat behind thick walls where ideals could be kept untouched by reality.

The controversy about modern art had originally flared up shortly before the turn of the century, when the definition of Impressionism divided the German art world in two opposing camps. The influential Berlin art critic Julius Meier-Graefe was the hero, but also the victim, of this controversy, which even in those days saw passionate outcries against cosmopolitanism and Judaism. It was the habit of the group opposing Meier-Graefe to throw all works of modern art into one pot with Impressionism, which was then employed as a catchword for all the offending tendencies of the modern movement. Meier-Graefe, on the other hand, represented an artistic ideal best described as secessionist or progressive: the kind of art collected by wealthy, politically liberal Germans. The kind of art that outraged the conservative and powerful civil servant class, and was officially rejected by the *Kunstpolitik* of Imperial Germany.

Teachers at art academies, who were artists themselves, were spokesmen for the latter groups. For them, the patriotic argument favouring a German tradition in the arts was a way to mobilize public opinion against the modern movement, while at the same time deflecting any doubts that might arise about the quality of their own paintings and sculptures. They attacked those museum directors who opened their doors to contemporary works of art. In fact, museums were caught in the crossfire



12. August Stüler, Nationalgalerie, Berlin: gable inscription reads ‘Der Deutschen Kunst MDCCCLXXI’. The Nationalgalerie was opened as a museum for new German art in 1876. Its dedicatory inscription, however, gives the date of the foundation of the Wilhelminian empire. The museum, destined to promote the growth of authentic German art, became the site of grave conflicts about Modernism, Internationalism and Nationalism.

of public opinion on this matter, and debate raged over what their future held: should they remain steadfast guardians of the traditional, or should they open up to the modern?

In 1896 the controversy broke out in earnest at the *Nationalgalerie* in Berlin, with its dedication beneath the front gable to *Der deutschen Kunst*, a museum, indeed, from which people would rather have banned modern works altogether.

Yet, it was precisely here that the modern movement found a supporter in Hugo von Tschudi, director of the museum. It seems that Tschudi had accepted many of the thirty-four new works exhibited in December of 1896 as donations from liberal collectors who were no friends of Imperial Germany's *Kunstpolitik*. This was a problem for many in the capital, since it was the government who supported the museum financially and owned the building. Opinions about progressive, modern society – the attitudes it reflected, the form of its political and social institutions – had already split the German upper classes down the middle. Both sides plundered the arts for what they needed in their political battle, and nothing more. In the end, art was politicized, not least because of the atmosphere of uncertainty about the role Germany would play in helping to shape the modern world. All you had to do was say you enjoyed French art, and you would immediately be asked 'but which side do you take on the question of German art?' In Berlin, Tschudi's exhibition of 'foreign' acquisitions was seen as a desecration of the German temple of art. He was reprimanded not long after and eventually forced to resign in 1908.

German artists had been calling for a national gallery since the democratic uprising of 1848, if not earlier. The *Nationalgalerie* in Berlin was founded in 1861 when Prussia took over the 'Consul Wagener' painting collection, which was exhibited in 1876 for the first time in the building as we know it today. It was dedicated to exhibiting the works of contemporary German artists, and as such was involved in the debate concerning modern art from the very beginning. In the year 1906 the museum hosted the legendary *Centennial Exhibition of German Art* on whose selection committee sat Julius Meier-Graefe. Inspiration for the exhibition had been the highly successful French *Centennial* of 1900. Yet, despite the

exhibition's merits, public controversy over the purchasing policies of the museum's art experts continued unabated.

Meier-Graefe did not help to calm matters with his 1905 article *Der Fall Böcklin* (The Case of Böcklin) which, in the charged atmosphere, caused a tremendous public outcry. The article inveighs against the painter Böcklin, claiming that he 'unites in one person all the sins committed by Germans against the logic of art', and that he betrays the true qualities of painting through contextual pathos and theatrical gestures. 'German-ness in Böcklin,' writes Meier-Graefe, 'has lead to [a painted version] of political slogan.' Henry Thode, then professor of art history at the University of Heidelberg, attacked Meier-Graefe's book *Entwicklungsgeschichte der modernen Kunst* (The History of the Development of Contemporary Art); he felt Meier-Graefe had completely muddled up Germany's role in the development of modern art. Thode, the son-in-law of Cosima Wagner, published a series of lectures 'concerning new German painting' under the title *Böcklin und Thoma*, even giving a lecture about 'Art and Morality'. The purpose of these was to enhance the reputation of his favourite painter Hans Thoma, in whose paintings he saw the embodiment of the German soul, by comparing him in a positive light to the standards of the modern movement.

It wasn't long before the combatants in this controversy quickly came to address fundamental questions in which their world-views, and not art, were really at issue. Meier-Graefe insisted that this new 'international' art was one 'that we already have' and that 'this [possession] is the only indisputable patriotism, the basis of all culture'. He welcomed the new 'international language' of art, one that 'transcends the natural diversity of place and race'. For Thode, on the other hand, art is never 'independent of its national character' but rather 'something thoroughly national' like language. Like many

others, Thode took a position against the foreign influence of French modern art which, he wrote, 'is being forced upon Germany from Berlin', a veiled reference to the painter Max Liebermann, among others.

The 'Bremen art controversy' broke out in 1911 after the Bremen museum's acquisition of a landscape by van Gogh who, despite his position within the French modern tradition, cannot simply be categorized as a painter of French origin. The acquisition inspired a German landscapist from the town of Worpswede, Carl Vinnen, to publish an inflammatory manifesto called *Ein Protest deutscher Künstler* (A Protest of German Artists) which was signed by 118 artists, some of them well-known. The expensive French painting, whose acquisition Vinnen attributed to a conspiracy by art dealers, is a 'danger to our national traditions' he writes, and threatens to undermine support for 'the arts of the Fatherland'. The angry reply followed just three months later under the title *Im Kampf um die Kunst* (In a Fight for the Arts) and was signed by all progressive-minded German artists, collectors and writers. These included future members of the *Blaue Reiter* movement, along with Max Beckmann who, as German as he and his instincts were, could not stoop as low as Vinnen had. Once again we see German public opinion split into two opposing camps, and once again the element of division was 'German traits' in the arts. The modern movement had only brought it to the surface.

While it attacks what it calls German 'art writers' who instead of advocating German art, had taken sides with modern French painting, the *Protest deutscher Künstler* also concerns money. For it takes aim at gallery owners and museum directors who, in their 'rush to buy' French paintings at outlandish prices, were damaging the market for German art. The

manifesto says they 'paid without hesitation 30,000 to 40,000 marks for superficial studies by van Gogh, in which the artist ignores the three dimensions of reality – line, colour and atmosphere'. Vinnen gets to the heart of the protest when he complains that, in this way 'millions of marks meant for German art are lost every year'. Yet even he poses general questions having little to do with practical matters, calling for a new spirit of patriotism which 'in the circle of our aesthetes' is so sorely missing. 'To guide our people in that direction,' he writes, 'seems to me more important than convincing them on a daily basis of their inferiority.'

Attacking Max Liebermann and Lovis Corinth for being 'anti-German impressionists' in the years prior to the *Brücke* and *Blaue Reiter* movements left no big-name contemporary artists in Germany at that time. For this reason, Henry Thode turned to the principles of content in his search for German characteristics in art. When he lectured on idealism and morality in art, he was referring to dignity of thematic content, not formal qualities, which confirms just how unfamiliar he was with the development of modern art in general. Like so many art historians before him, Thode was enthralled by the holistic approach, of establishing continuity between contemporary German art and that which had preceded it. German traits that did not conform to the modern movement, he seems to imply, were the same traits that had set German art apart in every period.

V

The Banning of German Expressionism and 'Degenerate Art'

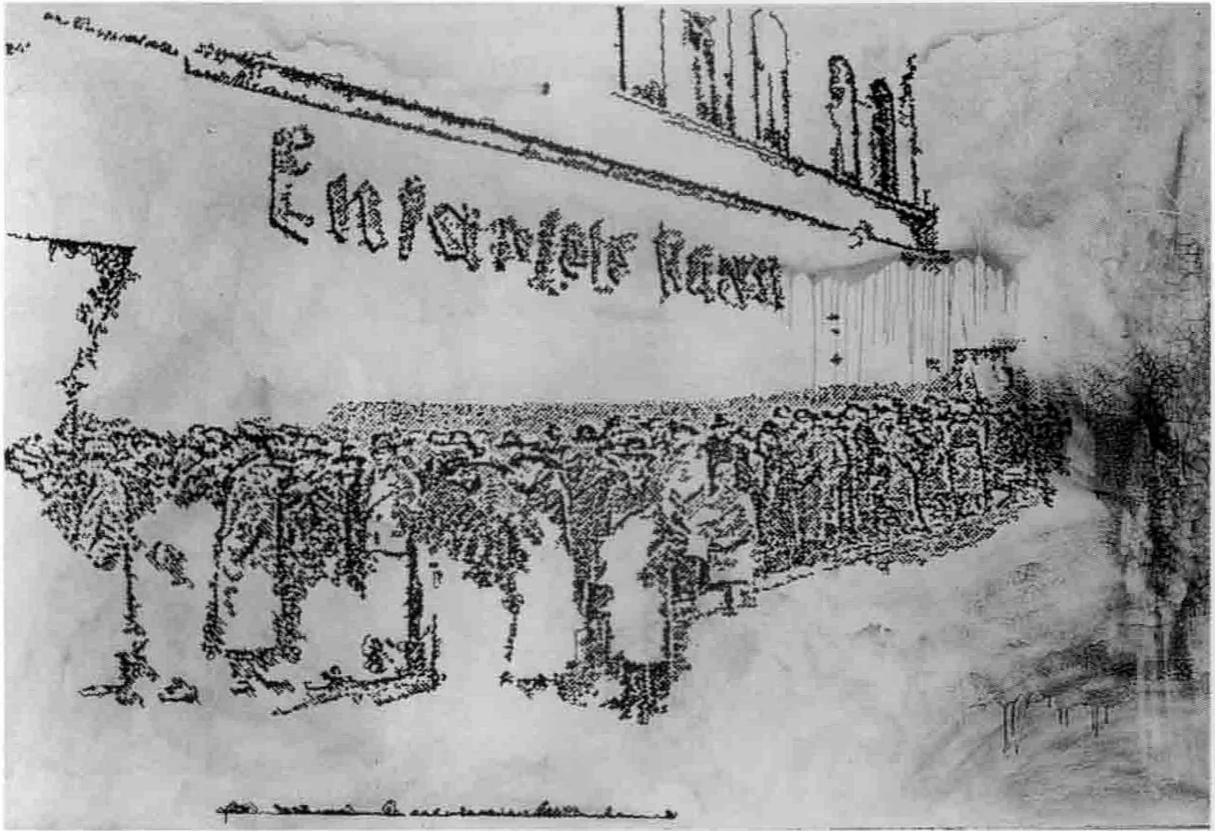
A generation after the 'Bremen art controversy' the national socialists were able to borrow all the political slogans they needed from the now traditional debate about German art. There was still a receptive audience for these slogans, an audience whose patriotic impulses wavered between having feelings of inferiority or visions of grandeur. If we see the prohibition and persecution of avant-garde art as a phenomenon isolated to Nazi Germany, then we would be ignoring the history of those relevant issues that lead up to it. We would be ignoring the fact that all arguments *for* a 'timeless German art form' and *against* contemporary modern art had already been formulated much earlier. So when the national socialists came to power, a point of view about the arts that was already shared by many people became official government policy. Only after it had become an efficient tool for justifying state-sponsored oppression did staunchly pro-German scholars from the older generation disassociate themselves from it. By the time such German painters as Max Beckmann appeared on the lists of artists forbidden to exhibit, and the museums had been emptied of their best works, it was already too late to call a halt to the process.

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National socialist leaders welcomed the controversy, seeing it as an opportunity to manipulate and gain popularity among the German working-classes, from which they themselves came. And it is precisely here, in the manipulative role of propaganda, that we find the old controversy about German art again, in an environment where it had never played a role before and that would soon change it beyond recognition. That the upper classes completely misread the situation at the beginning, when national socialism was still just a political movement, does not need to be addressed in depth here. There is no need to elaborate further on the two 1937 exhibitions in Munich, except to say that they bore witness to a separation of art into two clearly defined and easily-recognizable groups – that of 'diseased' and 'degenerate', and 'healthy' and 'German', the latter inspired by heavenly impulses, the former demonic. Seen through today's eyes, this radical employment of art for propaganda purposes appears to parody the old debate, which was no longer a 'debate' because the art public it addressed no longer had the right of rebuttal.

The regime's ideologists were perfectly aware how much they owed to the debate about German art, and knew how to use it to manipulate the fears people had about the 'dangers' of the modern movement. A few times they even went so far as to thank pro-German scholars of the older generation whose work had – or so they thought – paved the way for their own. A case in point was an article in the publication *Das Bild* in 1934, which singles out Henry Thode and '[what] began in Heidelberg when a courageous man took a public stand against internationalism in the arts for the first time'. This struggle has now been won, it goes on, for we finally have 'a knowledge of what is German in art'.

This 'knowledge' would spell disaster for Expressionism just when it had finally been accepted as a genuinely German style.



13. Sigmar Polke, *Degenerate Art* (1984), Kunstmuseum Bonn. Polke, one of the foremost contemporary artists, recreated in this image the infamous exhibition of Degenerate Art, which the National Socialists held in Munich in 1937 in order to blame Modernism for its own errors. The exhibition was to deliver the counter-image to true German art which was displayed in the newly built Haus der Kunst. Polke uses a printed reproduction of an old photograph which showed a long line of Germans waiting in front of the exhibition to see the humiliation of Modernist art with their own eyes. The painting monumentalises the photographic record but also analyses its inability to prove anything by displaying the faded qualities of the autotype.

In fact, Expressionism had already passed the peak of its influence in painting when the national socialists suddenly began to repress it. Nonetheless, it remained the most popular contemporary style of art among the educated classes, who did not take kindly to its banishment, especially since it was recognized as a truly German phenomenon. Its expressive style seemed to owe much to Early German painting, and promised to finally provide that crucial link with the past so many had searched for

HERMANN BAHR
EXPRESSIONISMUS



DELPHIN VERLAG MUENCHEN



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14. Fritz Hellmuth Ehmscke, cover of the first edition of Hermann Bahr's *Expressionismus* (1916). Hermann Bahr was one of the 'angry young men' who identified with a wildness inherent in the German soul. The writer thus proclaimed the rise of Expressionism as a rebirth of national art. The blame of barbarism would, in fact, turn into a victory for the Germans, once they had accepted that their innermost nature was much too wild to be tamed by the average superficial civilization.

over the years. There was, in fact, sufficient consensus among art historians over this, that when the new rulers began their campaign to repress certain kinds of art and Expressionism was included on the list, it was a major setback for the discipline as a whole. It meant from that point on, the search for German art forms was once again limited to the past, since contemporary art was no longer tolerated – except for the *kitsch* produced by the Nazi painter Adolf Ziegler and the Nazi sculptor Arno Breker, the government's preferred artists.

Expressionism had long been popular in Germany by the early 1930s. Its cult-following had begun back in 1916 with the publication of *Expressionismus* by Hermann Bahr, a book enough in demand to be in its third reprinting by 1919. It is interesting, and telling, that the same slogans employed in the debate about German art that we have been tracing can all be found in this book. Bahr rejects Impressionism outright because it was favoured by German liberals. Impressionism, he writes, represents 'mankind bereft of spirituality'. If Impressionism did away with the great themes with which the arts have always been concerned, if it did away with the personal vision of the artist as well, then, with the appearance of Expressionism, both have come back into the fold. 'Expressionism', Bahr exclaims, 'gave humanity a voice again.'

Whether the younger generation of German artists of the period had really set themselves such lofty goals is debatable. They seemed more interested in laying bare the German soul

EXHIBITION OF TWENTIETH CENTURY GERMAN ART



**NEW BURLINGTON
GALLERIES W.1.**

JULY 8th - 30th

PATRONS INCLUDE:— Augustus John (*President*), The Rt. Rev. the Lord Bishop of Birmingham, Sir Kenneth Clark, Lord Ivor Churchill, Pablo Picasso, Herbert Read, Esq., Sir Michael Sadler, C.B., K.C.S.I.

ADMISSION 1/6

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15. Poster for the exhibition of twentieth-century German art (1938). A year after the Munich exhibition of Degenerate Art, the Burlington Galleries in London opened an exhibition which was to defend and rehabilitate the true greatness of modern German art. Among the 269 pictures and sculptures exhibited in July 1938, some bore the traces of the violence inflicted upon them by the National Socialists. The art critic, Herbert Read, who was influential in organizing the exhibition wrote in the foreword: 'It is certainly justified to say that modern German art is totally unknown in Great Britain'.

by proudly reclaiming that barbaric nature of which they had always found themselves accused. The *Wilden* did not want to be educated in the bourgeois sense. They wanted to be German. The *Neue Wilden* movement of the 1980s consciously adopted their name as a direct reference to the first generation of Expressionists. It benefits us to take a closer look at the German concept of 'wild', which in this context means 'primitive' or 'savage'. As we have seen, the term was already commonly used with reference to the age of Dürer in German art, when supposedly the 'wild men' of the Middle Ages suddenly became 'noble savages' with Germanic blood, who lived deep in the German forests and who were just as much a part of those forests as the satyr was a part of his pastoral arcadia in the south. Classical humanists like Conrad Celtis, and painters like Albrecht Altdorfer, were dedicated to that nostalgic fairy tale of a Germanic culture from the dawn of history which had been around since Tacitus' *Germania*.

It was precisely to *Altdeutsche* graphic art, especially that from Dürer's time, that the modern Expressionists looked with the hope of translating it into the archaic dictums of their woodcuts. And while it is true that they were just as drawn as their French contemporaries to the unencumbered power of the carvings and wood sculpture of native peoples, German Expressionists (unlike the Fauves) were prepared to seek out

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WEEKLY ILLUSTRATED
July 16, 1938

TEMPTATION
by BECKMANN
Left—14 best tempera
which aroused much
discussion when shown
in the U.S.

'ALL DEGENERATE' said Hitler—but 2,000,000 came to see them!

JUST over a year ago Hitler held two art exhibitions in Munich. One was of pictures approved by the Nazi Government. Twenty thousand people came to see it. The other was of "Degenerate painting," planned "to give an insight into the last horrible chapters of the cultural decline during the last decade before the great change." Two million people came to see it.

Now on in London at the New Burlington Galleries is a representative exhibition of the art which Hitler found degenerate. It contains most of the real masters of German painting during the past half-century. A distinguished collection of names sponsored the Exhibition, ranging from Augustus John to the Bishop of Birmingham, and from H. G. Wells to Sir Kenneth Clark, Director of the National Gallery.

In the last few weeks some of the pictures seem to have grown nervous. Pains have been taken to make sure that the exhibition is "non-political" and has "no ideological bias." There have been consultations about hanging several of the most important works.

Facts are, however, that many of these paintings are first-rate. That the artists who did them have either been driven out, or forced to change their style. Whether you think that's "political" or not depends, of course, on how you look at it. Since two million Germans don't seem to mind and see the "degenerate" paintings, there seems no reason why we shouldn't be given the chance to dare as well.



TOSCANINI by BENNO ELKAN, whose war memorials have been broken down all over Germany. Elkan has made candidates for Oxford and Cambridge colleges and for Buckfast Abbey.



POISON by KLEE is typical of the more abstract German work, regarded in present-day Germany as mental and meaningless.



EINSTEIN by MAX LIEBERMANN, leading German Impressionist, who died in 1935. He was President of the Prussian Academy of Art from 1920 to 1933.



MOTHER by the 71-year-old painter, KATHIE KOLLWITZ, regarded as the greatest living woman artist in Germany. Right, "MARTYRED MANKIND," another of BARLACH's impressive sculptures in wood.



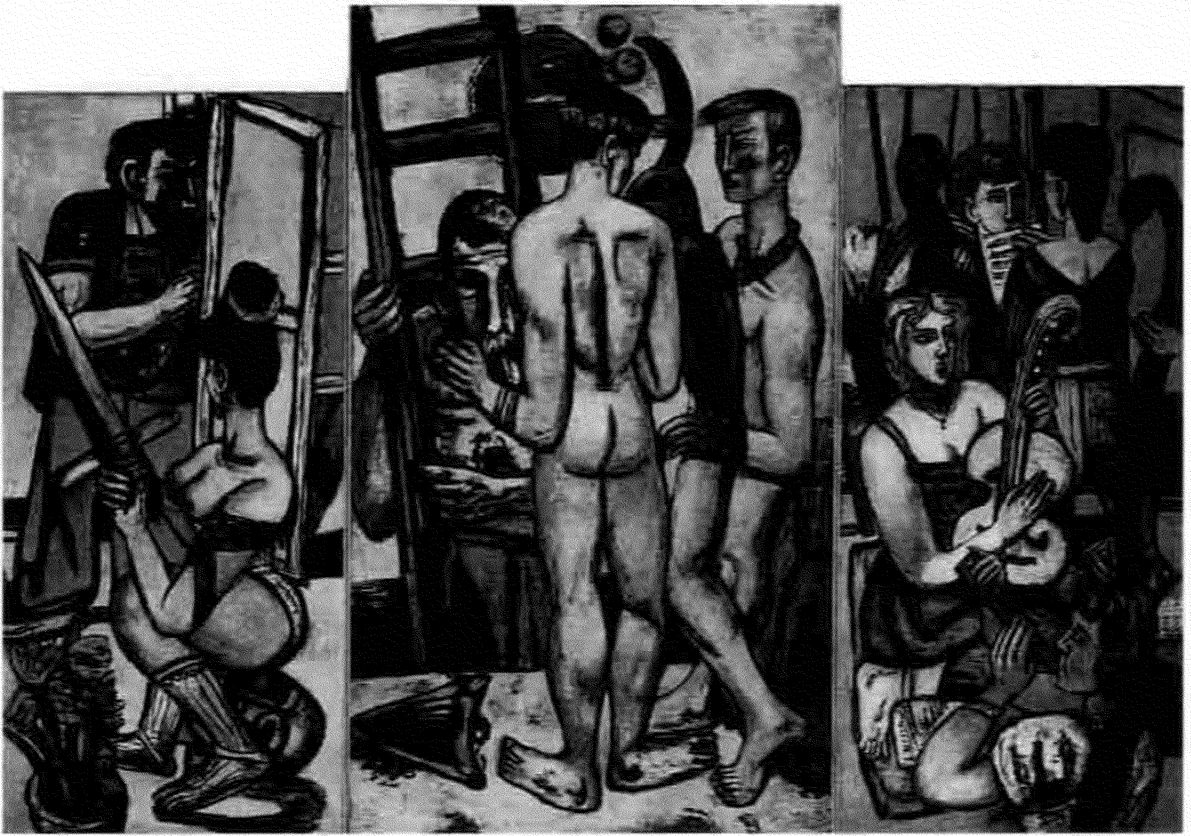
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16. Review of the exhibition *Entartete Kunst*, *Weekly Illustrated* 16 July 1938. British newspapers informed their readers of the violence against modern art in National Socialist Germany. The artists and their works were welcomed as refugees from their native country. Max Beckmann's triptych *Temptation* was shown on the cover of *The Times Literary Supplement*. Beckmann, who already lived in exile in the Netherlands, came to London on 21 July 1938 to deliver the most important text from his writings in art theory, 'My Theory of Painting'.

the wellspring of their own roots, even if it meant going against the notions of primitivism. In the process, they put a specifically German stamp on the concept of *Wilden* as described above – for which the French used the term 'Primitives' (Fauves) – even though they would have been unable to pinpoint exactly what that was. Wilhelm Hausenstein simplified things for them in 1914 when, out of the blue, the art critic wrote that the painter Emil Nolde was the German counterpart to Paul Gauguin, who as we all know searched for 'the barbaric' outside Europe. Hausenstein's comparison of the two painters was to emphasize that Nolde wanted to renew the 'artistic spirit of the *Wilden*', a goal that, as we now know, was a common mistake made by the purveyors of modern art back then.

Despite the anti-establishment character of its early years, Expressionism eventually became mainstream, favoured by the art community precisely because it was so German. This new 'expressive' art fitted easily into the holistic approach and could, given the right context, be traced back to the Middle Ages. Soon art historians were attempting just that, enthusiastically proclaiming Ottonian art as an expressionist style of the Medieval period, and as such the first truly German style. This new focus was employed even by the pro-German scholars of the generation before – Werner Weisbach, for instance, and Heinrich Wölfflin, who had just completed a book on an Early

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17. Max Beckmann, *The Argonauts* (1950), Washington, National Gallery of Art. In the last year of his life Max Beckmann, who then lived in New York and had never returned to Germany, painted the great triptych *The Argonauts*. The title, which is borrowed from Greek mythology, refers to a group of German exiles who stayed in Amsterdam during the war years and called themselves by this name. Beckmann himself lived among them and shared their views, representing German culture in exile. Later, he turned their memory into a timeless myth of human existence, experiencing the world as a place of exile.

German apocalypse manuscript from the Reichenau that contained Ottonian miniatures. They were the leading lights of the new, promising scholarly direction taken in the 1920s. It looked as if the old dream of historical continuity – of identifying German traits through the arts, by linking a style of the past with one of the present – might finally come true.

This only made the shock that much greater when the national socialists declared the debate itself illegal, and outlawed as anti-German the exhibition of Expressionist works. Wilhelm

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Pinder tried to save Expressionism from being black-listed. Gottfried Benn undertook what would turn out to be a last-ditch attempt at the very same thing in 1933 with his famous, but ultimately unsuccessful, *Bekenntnis zum Expressionismus* (In Defense of Expressionism). 'This strong belief', writes Benn 'in a bright future for German art' paradoxically goes hand-in-hand with the 'rejection of the style and sense of form offered by the immediate past.' People were already characterizing 'Expressionist painting as degenerate' Benn writes, a style that is nothing less than 'the most important, and most recent artistic revolution in Europe', a movement that rejects outright the 'bourgeois world-view'. For Benn, if Expressionism was rejected, it would break the long sequence of revolutionary artistic movements through the ages. Art would then develop into the Nazi ritual of the mass demonstration, like at Nuremberg, with which he characterized the political aesthetic of his times.

Once national socialist policy dictated what could and could not be studied, the voices debating modern art fell silent. There was a strange logic at work behind the decision to weed out all works of modern art in order to promote the growth of 'German art', only to find that nothing remained that could be given official sanction to represent Germany on the international art scene. Better *no art* at all, it seemed, than *anti-German* art. German traits in the arts became, to the shock of the old pro-German school, an arbitrary matter. Such a drastic situation forced many scholars once again to shift the focus of their research to the past. As early as 1933, the periodical published by the German Art History Association was obliged '*of course* to limit our articles to [subjects concerning] German art'. But it wasn't long before the periodical had added that 'for the time being [articles concerning] the recent past as well as the present are off limits'.

VI

The Escape into 'Occidental Art'

Opposition to the modern movement was supported by a school of thought that envisioned it as symbolic of cultural decline, the so-called *Katastrophentheorie*, which was one of the main concepts in the study of Occidental art. In Oswald Spengler's two-volume *The Decline of the West* published in 1917, modernism is depicted as a harbinger of the decline of western civilization. In dealing with the subject of art, the book outlines a course of history that seemed to be confirmed with every passing year, as Germany moved inexorably through the chaos of Weimar towards financial and political ruin. The modern movement, writes Spengler, is 'urban culture, non-metaphysical civilization, apocalypse and cosmopolitanism, instead of homeland. [It is] faceless masses instead of a nation of citizens, and convention instead of tradition'. These were easy terms for people to understand. They were easy to apply when judging the various facets of modernism, including artistic ones. They give a clear picture of how highly emotions ran against modernism, and how strong the need was for the old myths. For the philosopher Spengler, the decline of Occidental culture was similar to that of classical antiquity, in that both were examples of decline during 'a historical period encompassing

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most of the known world, lasting several centuries, and at whose beginning we now stand.'

For the diverse followers of Spengler, the concept of cultural decline, as well as the metaphysical notion of Occidentalism itself, was a generic formula that could be applied to just about any issue whatsoever. As a real, historical entity 'the Occident', or the era of the Latin West, had ceased to exist with the rise of the modern nation-state at the beginning of the Renaissance. However, in its reinvented form – a form supported not by historical fact but by the history of ideas – Occidental culture was understood as having fallen victim to the modern movement, which was made to appear like a traitorous act against the cultural traditions of the west. With the real catastrophes of World War II, modernism seemed to meet an untimely end, while the mythical notion of the Occident was reborn from the ashes. This is to exaggerate, of course, but the argument that Occidental culture had been victimized by the modern movement was an argument that made up for what it lacked in logic with wishful thinking. Modernism seemed only to exist at the expense of Occidental culture, and vice versa. In an era when Germans were looking to reinvent themselves anyway, Occidental culture's valiant battle for survival in a hostile 'modern' world took on the trappings of myth – a myth that replaced the older, and now unpopular, myth of the nation.

In the wake of the catastrophe of 1945, the Germans should have been able to agree that the search for German identity in the arts had failed miserably. At this point, the debate could have been purged of all patriotic clichés. But nothing of the sort occurred. Paul Parin's *Der nationale Schande zu begegnen* (On Facing National Guilt) gives an excellent analysis of how postwar Germany avoided its own past. The Swiss sociologist compares Germany's experience to Italy's, where a similar nationalistic tradition was dealt with after the war but in a

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18. Joseph Beuys delivering his last speech at the Wilhelm Lehmbruck Museum, Duisberg, 12 January 1986. Joseph Beuys appeared in public for the last time when he received the art prize named after the sculptor Wilhelm Lehmbruck, a son of the city of Duisburg. At the occasion he gave a speech in which he called the sculptor 'his teacher'. In emphasizing his debt to a great predecessor Beuys confessed to an unbroken genealogy of idealist German art. His vocation to become an artist, Beuys said, was inspired by a picture of a Lehmbruck sculpture, 'And in the picture I saw a . . . flame, and I heard the words: protect the flame'.

completely different way. The traditional German fixation on an ideal, that can be renamed and looked for somewhere less controversial – in an Occidental culture shared with other European nations, for example – offered what Parin says was 'protection against feelings of helplessness and humiliation'. German cultural scholars and writers did not make the German past a topic because it carried such emotional baggage with it, and in the end the long-abused debate about German art also fell victim to a form of collective amnesia.

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19. Wilhelm Lehmbruck, *Falling Man* (1915/16). Lehmbruck (1881–1919) created a symbol of suffering and protest when he exhibited the sculpture of the *Falling Man* (*Der Gestürzte*, literally 'the one who fell down') in the middle of World War I. This Expressionist figure represented both self-protection and self-sacrifice and thus carried 'the expression of humanity', as Beuys called it. The young sculptor committed suicide in Berlin shortly after the war.

The almost missionary zeal that had traditionally inspired the defining of German art – a calling, as we have seen, that developed out of opposition to the rest of the 'hostile' world – was easily transmitted from the parameters of the nation to those of a united Occident. The German-ness need only be removed in order to adapt it to the new postwar situation. This was all too understandable. Before taking part in this new Occidental culture, Germany had to be accepted back into the community of nations. Yet at the same time, the scholarly focus on Occidental art had the advantage that it promised to be conducted in an atmosphere in which the question of guilt

would play a minor role, making it that much easier for Germany's past debacles to get swept under the carpet. In such an atmosphere, it was predictable that the *Katastrophentheorie* would become popular, and that its standard argument would be that the decline of western culture had been caused by a modern movement that had led everyone astray. Idealism played a big role in this, but it was a tired and disappointed idealism in search of something new to believe in, and hoping in the process to avoid having to deal with the question of guilt.

Postwar German society, then, lived a kind of contradiction, one glaring enough to illuminate the role art history played in the past. While the *Katastrophentheorie* was quickly brought up to date with the formulation that modernism had undermined the Christian ideals of western culture, thereby ushering in the decline and fall of art as well, others were attempting to adapt to a new internationalism exemplified by the resurrection of modern art via the United States, but this time in the form of abstraction so popular at the time. Artists that had been black-listed by the Nazis seemed to symbolize how modernism had been 'interrupted' in Germany. Their reputations were assured in the years after the war because the taint of national socialism had to be purged from the field. They were proof that some Germans had actually opposed the regime, while others had been forced into silence for a period of years. There were no serious discussions about the 'degenerate art' phenomenon of 1937, nor was there a historiographical analysis undertaken of the nationalist school.

For postwar scholarship, the concept of Occidental culture is one that does not include modernism. Instead, Occidental culture has become synonymous with Catholic Europe before the Reformation, a Europe still untainted by the cultural chau-

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vinism of the nation-state. Specifically, this meant it focused on the early Middle Ages, which promised fertile ground in the move towards reconciliation with Germany's neighbours. In addition it would allow German scholars the chance not to have to address the most recent past directly. The choice of the Middle Ages as a period of study precluded the study of German art for purely historical reasons, as there was no such political entity then. The practical, yet political advantages gave specializing in the Middle Ages a certain moral mandate.

In 1949 a conference for art historians from three nations – excluding West Germany – was held in Austria, which by then had skillfully disassociated itself from the recent history it shared with Germany. Its topic was 'Europe's first millennium', during which Occidental culture had developed and matured. A year later the conference was expanded to include the scholars of five nations and was held in Mainz, West Germany. Exhibitions such as *Das werdende Abendland an Rhein und Ruhr* (The Coming into Being of the Occident in the Rhineland and the Ruhr) from 1956, or the exhibition *Karl der Grosse* (Charlemagne) in Aachen in 1965 continued the trend.

The myth of an Occidental culture not only became the main focus of research among German art historians after the war, it also offered them the chance to apply the holistic approach to a past golden age that experienced decline and fall. This focus was employed by the art historian Hans Sedlmayr in his book *Verlust der Mitte* (Art in Crisis), which was written during the war but did not appear until 1948. Once again the analysis was of 'degenerate' modern art, but this time from a Christian point of view, placing the modern movement in opposition to the Christian rather than the German tradition. Some scholars took exception to this view. One was Werner Haftmann who warned of 'a fashionable disaffection with modern culture' and attacked those who 'are always talking

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about renewing the Christian culture of the west but who, when faced with a completely new situation, don't really want to go through the process of renewal at all'.

Religion and art, when reduced to a common denominator, became symbols for an untainted cultural tradition. Art bore witness to religion, as it once had to the German nation. Heinrich Lützeler's *Die christliche Kunst des Abendlandes* (The Christian Art of the West) was brought out once again and, like Sedlmayr's book, it addresses an 'art of the middle' by which he means the Middle Ages. His 'unifying principle of Christian art' is a historical construct arising out of the postwar move towards one Europe, a construct meant to remind France and Germany of their shared past. On a scholarly level, it meant that modernism had spelled 'tragedy' for Christian art, an idea that was popular for a time after World War II. German art historians soon proclaimed the 'European' Middle Ages – which had looked so German just a few years before – as the true measure of art.

The controversy about modernism now continued with new faces and reformulated arguments, that is if the subject was not ignored altogether. In 1948 the first Conference for German Art Historians was held at Castle Brühl near Cologne. Naturally, its subject was the art of the Middle Ages. In his opening address, the art historian Herbert von Einem reminded his audience that every new generation is faced with the task of redrawing the picture it has of the past. 'The twentieth century', he said, 'has torn off that veil with which the nineteenth century wanted to hide the abyss into which Europe threatened to drop.' The disasters of the recent past could have been avoided, he went on, 'had we only been aware of our shared Occidental heritage'. He challenged both art historians and theologians to rediscover their lost values in order to free their work from ideological bias. The papers presented at the

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conference were concerned with the themes of renewal and rebirth in the art of the Middle Ages. The fact that Germany's leading art historians had left the country by 1933 was not mentioned at all at the conference.

Fifteen years later, in 1964, the International Congress of Art Historians was held in Germany for the first time since before the war, in Bonn, its topic being *Stil und Überlieferung in der Kunst des Abendlandes* (Style and Continuity in the Tradition of Occidental Art). The opening address was given once again by Herbert von Einem, who expanded the parameters of Occidental art to include the Baroque, but not modern art. The conference defined 'continuity' as that tradition which transcends the normal period definitions of art. The dream of historical continuity, once so feverishly searched for in the myth of the nation, was now being searched for in the art of Medieval Europe, whose unified appearance provided the model for the EEC. The phenomenon of style in art did not just indicate change, but also unity, if the content – in works prior to the beginning of the Italian Renaissance, at least – still 'combined art with religion'. According to Herbert von Einem, the modern movement's 'lack of such cultural continuity is a major impoverishment for the arts in general'.

Much was left out by this revisionist view of art history. It helped German art historians avoid those topics that had dominated the discipline before 1945. It was a denial of sorts, that finally burst to the surface in 1970 at the twelfth German Conference for Art Historians in Cologne. Papers dealing with 'tainted' subjects within the discipline were placed under a special section called *Das Kunstwerk zwischen Wissenschaft und Weltanschauung* (The Work of Art: Between Scholarship and Ideology). When it was discovered that some of the older art historians, who saw themselves as being free from ideological bias, had actually dared to use words from a now discredited

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vocabulary, a conflict arose that was drawn down generational lines. In the end, a concerted effort to come to grips with the tradition of German art scholarship never got off the ground. If a divided Germany did not make the question moot anyway, it would at the very least assure a deferment of the debate.

In the meantime, the most important representative of the Occidentals, if I may call them that, had come up with an alternative to the traditional way of looking at German art. Wolfgang Braunfels's eight-volume study *Die Kunst im Heiligen Römischen Reich Deutscher Nation* (Art in the Holy Roman Empire *Nationis Germanicae*) chose to explain the geographical dispersion and local variety of German art prior to 1806 as a direct result of the fact that the Empire consisted of many small, semi-independent principalities. There were no Germanic characteristics, Braunfels writes, not to mention a style with traits specific to German art, but rather a colourful mosaic of mature artistic traditions that had developed within local and regional parameters. A work of art reflected the characteristics of the principality where it was created – whether that was in a bishop's diocese, a dukedom, monastery or town.

Braunfels goal was to focus 'on territorial history, and the world of the small medieval principality that made up the Empire' and to 'trace the conditions under which works of art were created'. His focus is modern in the sense that it traces those regional characteristics that remained constant – a scholarly focus that has continued to gain in popularity since then – until the demise of the Holy Roman Empire. This situation came to an end when the variegated regional entities were integrated into the modern nation-state. After that, bourgeois society took the reigns of power from the Church in Europe, and the function of art in society changed.

The 1992 International Congress for Art History was held for a second time in Germany. Those of us who had followed

the debate about choosing that year's host city could only marvel at how German unification made all disputes seem outdated. The choice of West Berlin as a site for the congress had been made over the bitter protests of more countries than just East Germany. Before the congress even took place, however, West Berlin had ceased to exist under that name. Berlin had once again become the capital of Germany, and the Iron Curtain was no more. For the first time since the influx of refugees after the World War II, Eastern Europe determined, if not the theme, at least the framework within which the congress took place. The new political situation in Europe requires a debate about the function of art history today, and what function it has fulfilled in the past in the different cultures of both east and west, but this does not concern us here.

VII

German German Art Two Very Different Kinds of German Art

The division of Germany after the war created a deep rift through the German art community, with the West joining the international modern movement, the East socialist realism. So different were the two from each other, that the will to debate what did and did not constitute good art was not there. Instead of looking to identify themselves within their own artistic tradition, both sides sought to base their work on a principle that conformed to their respective political systems. For both sides, this basic principle was more or less imported: in West Germany it was a revived modernism, in East Germany socialism. In practice that meant free-market art in the West, and state-sponsored art in the East. The old controversies no longer divided the Germans, an iron curtain did. On both sides of the Wall the Germans enjoyed the right to be in the right against the other. It was confessional division all over again.

The protection the border provided for both sides disappeared with unification. Controversy broke out immediately afterwards, and the end is nowhere in sight. A certain balance between the two sides had been achieved over the years, a balance on which both depended for the validity of their

concepts. But now the scales have tipped, and exhibiting works from the West in the former GDR is not going to make the two sides one and the same tradition, even if our divided cultural heritage seems to have allowed for some adjustment over the years. East German art has been on the market in the West for a long time. Painters who fled the East have been important on the western art scene for years.

Zweierlei deutsche Kunst, the idea of two mutually exclusive kinds of German art, was the one topic German critics could agree on. Yet even in consensus there was strife among them, at least for a while, concerning the acceptability of representational art which had always appeared to possess more German characteristics than abstract art. Soon the traditional focus on German characteristics was replaced by an emphasis on the differences between the two Germanies. One of the concerns, indeed obsessions, that artists of this period shared was German history, regardless of whether they expressed themselves through realism or merely through abstraction. German history came to be symbolized by the division of our cultural and political traditions during the postwar period. This led artists to turn to pre-war Germany for their cultural roots, searching for something on which they might base their work. The choice was not easy, however, since there were several stylistic options open to them, such as Expressionism or Realism.

Even though neo-Expressionism has usually been understood as being the most important art form to come out of post-war Germany, it was not exclusive to the *Neue Wilden* movement. In 1984 the American artist Donald Judd attacked neo-Expressionism for its 'nationalism', which he felt was 'rather reactionary' and which he basically thought to be 'kitsch'. He was not willing to see the movement as simply the favourite style of certain individual German painters. For Judd, Anselm

Kiefer was the most important representative of the style. 'Maybe', Judd writes, 'we're dealing with a parody of nationalism here, but I don't believe that.' Since that dismissal, Kiefer has tried even harder to stylize traditional German themes into myths, both when his theme suggests it or his equally suggestive pictorial language does. Joseph Beuys, a German artist through and through, chose another way. He completely renounced the use of German clichés in his art, unless of course his theme was a cliché itself.

The antithesis posed by *Zweierlei deutsche Kunst* aggravated, rather than pacified, things between East and West because both claimed the 'real' neo-Expressionism for themselves. The debate was carried out as though it concerned choosing the legitimate heir to our cultural tradition. 'Past German controversies lived on, preserved in the phenomenon of *Zweierlei deutsche Kunst*,' wrote the art critic Eduard Beaucamp in 1990. 'The controversies of Schwitters versus Beckmann,' he goes on, 'or Bauhaus versus *Berlin Großstadt-Realismus*, were no less emotional than those of Beuys versus Mattheuer, or the *Zero-Group* versus the Leipzig school of critical realism in more recent times. The influence Otto Dix, Beckmann, Ernst Hofer and Oskar Kokoschka had on the generation of German artists that immediately followed them was felt only in the east.' The work of the East German painter Bernhard Heisig, for instance, was directly inspired by Max Beckmann, while Beckmann's influence in West Germany was limited at the time to a Max Beckmann Society, founded during the height of abstraction's popularity in order to develop *appreciation* for the great German artist's work. After his death, Beckmann's work began to be exhibited in West Germany. It contradicted the prevailing abstractionism there, however, and the impact it had was minimal.

East German painters were not the subject of a major exhibition in West Germany until Hamburg's *Zeitvergleich* (Com-

paring Times), in 1982. In the foreword to the exhibition catalogue, Günther Grass writes that 'They paint more German in the GDR. This country and its citizens are visibly more weighed down by Germany's past.' Grass also saw evidence of Germany's divided history 'in the history of its painting', the likes of which can be found in no other country's cultural tradition. This is not surprising, he goes on, 'since the arts in Germany have always attracted the interest of the authorities', an interest that would have made them invariably react against the artist's 'emphatic need to be different'. With the political erosion of both systems 'the paintings have begun to resemble one another' and both sides are disturbed by the likeness.

In 1981 the *Westkunst* exhibition in Cologne consecrated the 'art of the west' as the iconic modern art. *Westkunst* could be traced without a break through the periods of art history, as long as the art of eastern Europe and the history of the GDR were not included. In the course of this history the Germans, but not the same Germans, played a double role. With the collective facts and theories of the one side, and of the other, critics were able to employ two distinct ways of accounting for the history of art. Each side was complete in and of itself, and its critical debates took place within its own tradition. These well-intentioned distinctions suddenly no longer applied because of unification. More important questions have now come to light.

Yet it is literally taboo among German critics these days to pose such questions. Now that the Wall is gone and our 'embarrassing' East German art legacy is there for everyone to see, many would like to forget it altogether. This is similar to the time when it was fashionable to block out the memory of Nazi art – to block out, not understand, to forget, not analyze. A recent exhibition of Nazi art caused bitter controversy here, and did nothing to further our understanding of the period. The debate concerning East German art, on the other hand,

inspires different emotional reactions because everyone involved in it realizes that East German art cannot be defined within the framework of West German art, and that the act of defining it would cast doubt on the assumed priority of *Westkunst*. Most acutely aware of this fact are those painters who fled the GDR, and have since become 'icons' in their own right in the west, those same artists who now vehemently repudiate the work of their former colleagues from East Germany. A recent controversy filled column after column of various daily newspapers here. It concerned membership requirements for the *Berlin Akademie der Bildenden Künste*. The debate was carried out using political and moral arguments, while somehow avoiding the most important criterion of all for admission – artistic achievement.

German critics first became concerned about a possible breakdown of their respective artistic world-views in the early 1960s, when young painters originally from the GDR caught the attention of the art community in the west. One of these was Gerhard Richter, one of Germany's earliest Pop artists. He and Sigmar Polke were founding members of a new artistic movement they tentatively called 'capitalistic realism'. Georg Baselitz, whom I put forward here as being a good example of what happened to artists in the two Germanies back then, was forced out of the East Berlin Academy of Arts in 1957 when he was but twenty years old. Not long after he was accepted as a student in the West Berlin Academy under the direction of Hann Trier where, Baselitz would say in a 1989 interview, a 'strange, cool environment' awaited him. In 1963 he would cause a major scandal with an exhibition at the Berlin art gallery *Werner und Katz*. Accusations flew, most of them concerning the exhibition's supposed obscenity, but there was more behind people's outrage than that. Baselitz's provocative



20. Georg Baselitz, *The Divided Hero* (1966), Derneburg. Baselitz, who left East Germany in order to finish his education in West Berlin, caused a much debated scandal in the early 1960s due to the obscene appearance of his subjects. With his figurative art, he opposed the prevailing abstract mode and intended to restore a German tradition rooted in Expressionism. This painting refers to the division of German art no less than to the division of the German state.

figuration was a revolt against avant-garde art and international abstraction, from which he wanted to 'distance himself through a bluntly figurative style of painting'. Among a cultural elite that still loved abstract art it was, in the words of the Swiss art critic Johannes Gachnang, 'as if cold war' had broken out.

Baselitz would continue to employ figuration in his paintings. Later, however, he would consciously turn the standard motifs of his pictorial language on their head in order to rid his art of them. The tension between self-expression through a particular motif, and the expression of the autonomous painted form, has perhaps always been especially acute in German painting, where, according to Baselitz, it has been 'more brittle, fragile and desolate' than in other traditions. 'My origins are German,' he said in the same interview, 'and through my painting I've become German for a second time, as it were. The tradition of German painting is the tradition of the ugly picture' from Albrecht Dürer to Emil Nolde. For the artist A. R. Penck, Baselitz is 'synonymous with being German', in that he attempts both to contradict and reconcile his own artistic tradition.

Young painters like Richter and Baselitz transformed the West German art scene in the 1960s. The impact they had in this respect has yet to be recognized. Acknowledging the influence of such artists is difficult because it would undermine the idea of *Zweierlei deutsche Kunst*, of there being two distinct German art worlds which defy comparison. For such a concept to be valid, there can be no crossovers. An artist who left the GDR in his youth and became famous in West Germany can only be understood within the framework of one of the two systems, regardless of the fact that he brought experiences from one side with him, and confronted the problems of the other when he arrived. Were someone to ask seriously what they represent to the German tradition as a whole, then it would

provide a better picture of the art scene in postwar Germany – a picture that is perhaps typical of the period, if *any* picture of German art can be called ‘typical’ these days.

This divided art scene produced some curiosities when the goal was polemical statement via images from German history, as was the case in the GDR where a monumental painting was a vehicle for pointing out the West’s ‘profound ignorance of history.’ I refer to the *Panorama*, a strangely anachronistic painting commissioned by the East German government in 1976, and carried out by the Leipzig painter Werner Tübke at one of the battlefield locations of the ‘Farmers Uprising’ of 1525 in Bad Frankenhausen, in the eastern state of Thuringia. The work is not only remarkable by virtue of its being ‘the world’s largest painting’, but also because it represents an actual German historical event painted in a Mannerist style which was flourishing precisely in the years the ‘Farmers Uprising’ took place. This is a simplification of sorts, since Tübke had already developed his own unmistakable style before carrying out the project. He feels committed to Mannerism, despite it being a sixteenth-century style, because it was a pan-European phenomenon. His art always contains utopian visions of this kind, which underlie every facet of every project he works on. Nevertheless, the *Panorama* is a *Programmbild*, a painting produced as a political statement and according to a political program. Its artistry emerges through the mask of a historical style.

A similar project in West Germany was undertaken to celebrate the history of free-market democracy through a work of art paid for with government funds. The artist for the project was to be chosen in a contest open to the public. The project began in 1987, when the city fathers of Frankfurt am Main decided to have St Paul’s church decorated with paintings depicting the history of democracy in Germany – not a bad

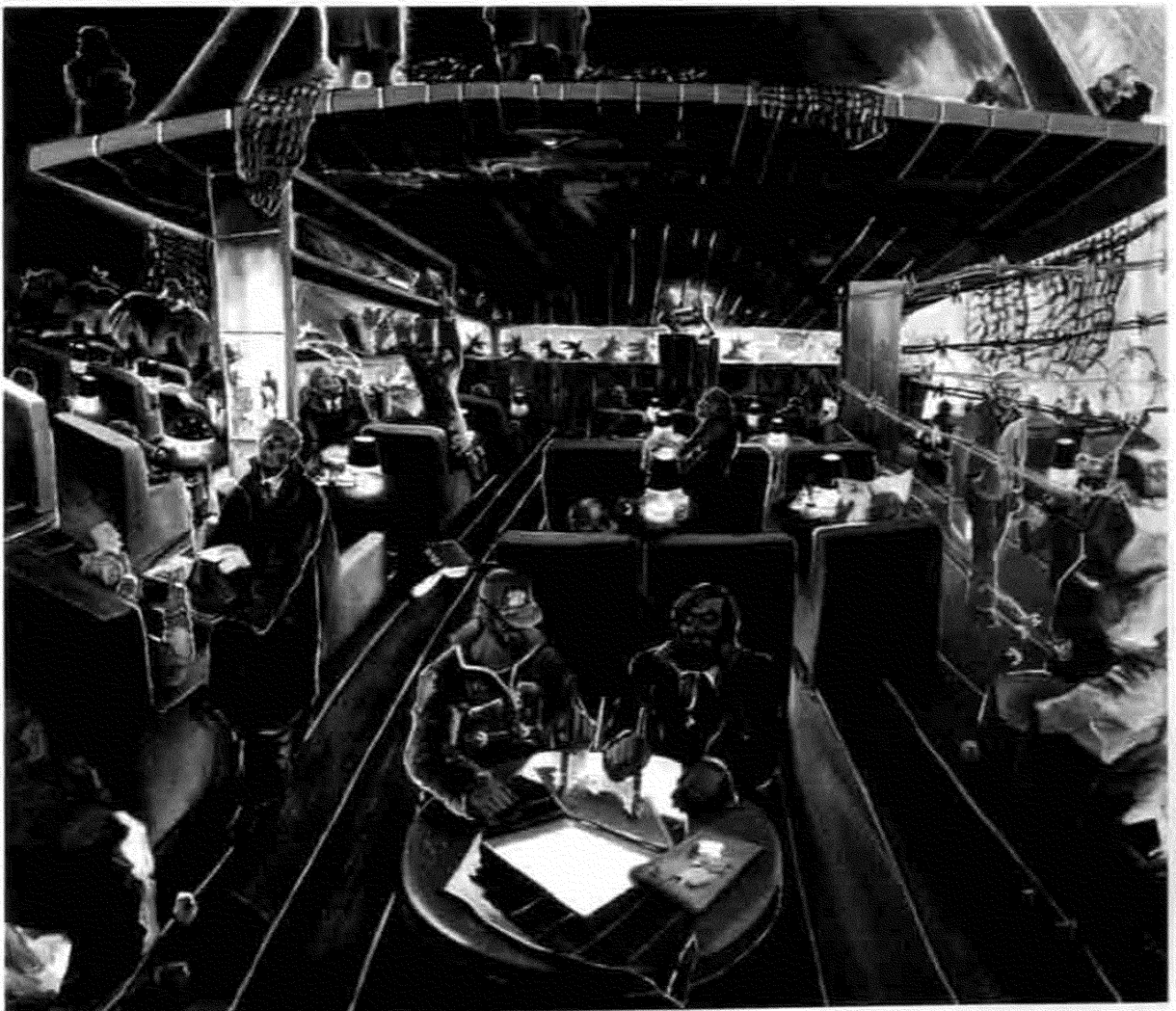


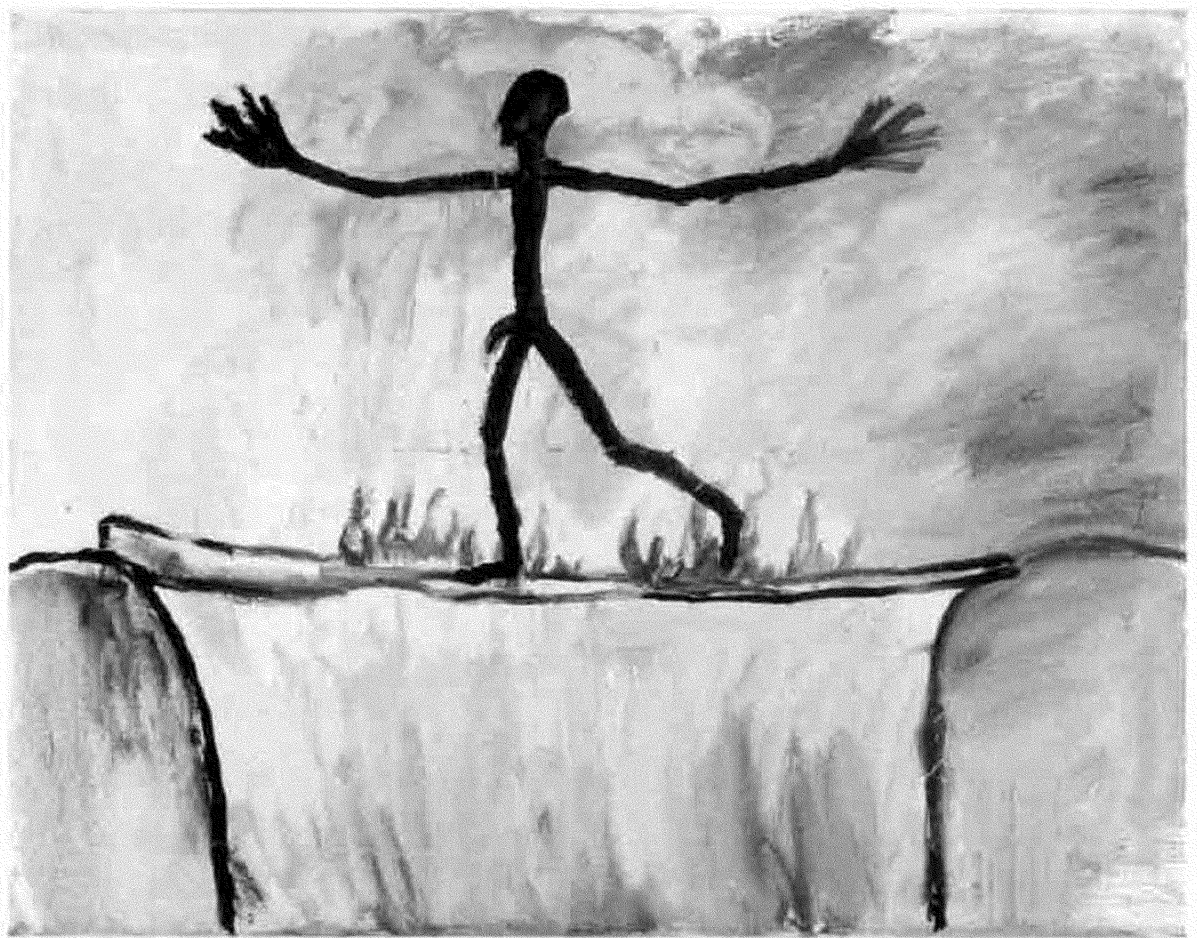
21. Werner Tübke. *The Battle of Frankenhausen*, detail (1982/3). Städtische Galerie Schloß Oberhausen und Ludwig-Institut. Tübke, the celebrated leader of the 'Leipzig School' of East German art, in this would-be nineteenth-century panorama, created an exotic product of postwar German art. Indeed, he not only portrayed an event from the Reformation (the peasants' revolt), but also rephrased the historical idiom of old German art (as favoured by Romanticism) as the authentic language for his topic.

choice since St Paul's had served as the parliament building in the democratic uprising of 1848. It was doomed to failure, as most art projects of this kind are, because most of the big-name artists in West Germany, including prominent artists originally from the GDR, refused to take part in any competition where

the 'thematic ideas and content' were determined beforehand and actually written up as binding contest regulations. In the end, the only artists to submit ideas were Johannes Grützke, Jörg Immendorff and A. R. Penck, with Grützke's idea

22. Jörg Immendorff, *Café Germany II* (1978). Michael Werner Gallery, Cologne. On several occasions in the 1970s Immendorff secretly met with his East German painter colleague R. Penck in a coffee house in East Berlin. The two artists discussed, across the Berlin Wall, a close collaboration to resist the frontier dividing German art. The facts however, precluded the realisation of this dream. Instead, Immendorff who had been a student of Beuys in Düsseldorf, painted a series of large pictures which symbolized the divided Germany by a *mise-en-scène* in the setting of the Café Germany where it would not even be possible to have coffee together in the same room, or in the same Germany.





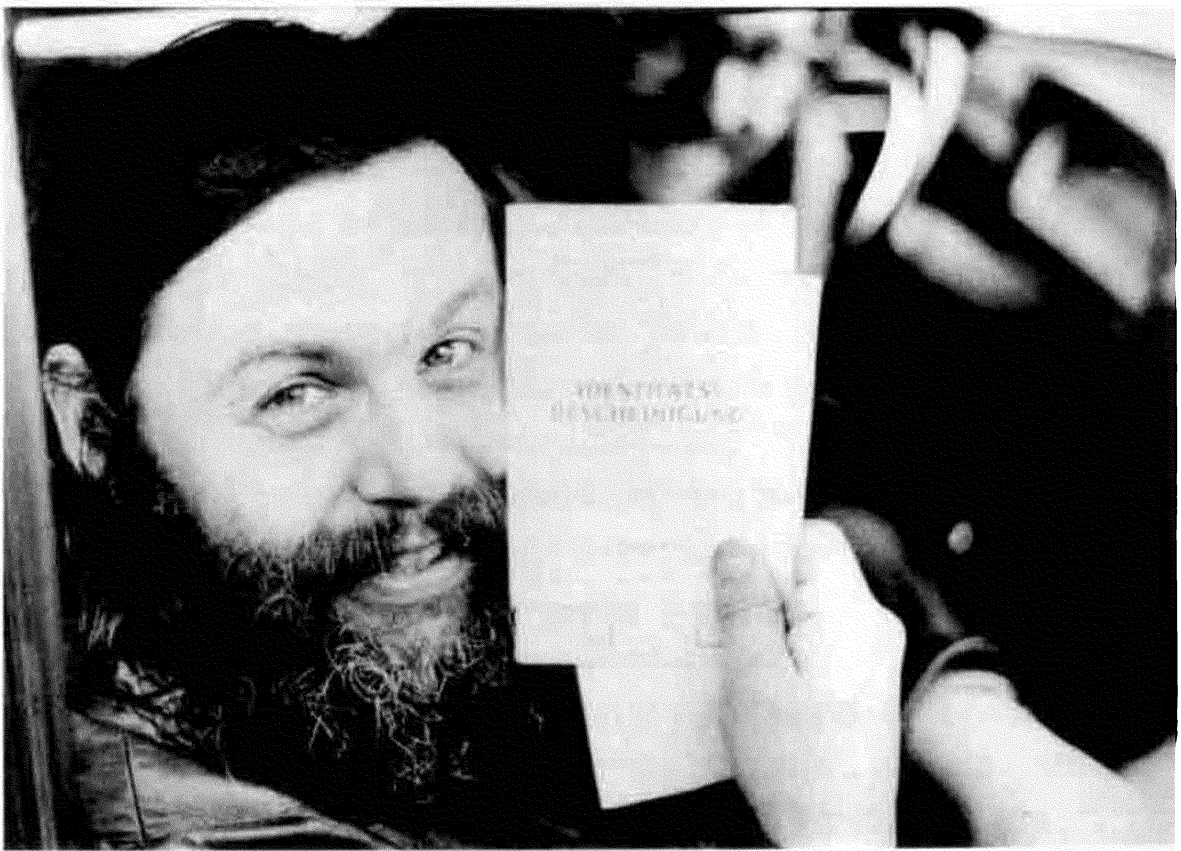
23. R. Penck, *The Crossing* (1963). In 1968, Ralf Winkler took the name of Penck, a scholar who had investigated the period of the ice age, an allusion to and denouncement of the icy climate between the two Germanies. His early paintings were smuggled by the Cologne gallery owner Michael Werner to the West where they were exhibited from the early 1970s onwards. Later on this practice was sanctioned by the Communist authorities when they could make money from the transfer. This painting seems to symbolize the dangerous crossing between the two worlds.

winning the contract because, among other reasons, his project was the least controversial, and therefore acceptable to both political parties of Frankfurt's city parliament.

Immendorff and Penck had caused a sensation ten years before, and without any government money whatsoever, when they chose in a very personal and idiosyncratic way to present the history of divided Germany in their art – a radical choice

of theme back then, as it transcended the intellectual divisions between East and West. The two forged what they called an 'action alliance' in East Berlin in 1976, the results of which were first exhibited a year later in a Cologne gallery, under the title *Penck mal Immendorff, Immendorff mal Penck*. The four versions of *Café Deutschland* by Immendorff – with their gestures of protest against the restraints inflicted by a divided world and by a divided artistic tradition, as well as their Expressionistic style – place them right in the centre of the German tradition of painting, to which protest against the German 'situation' has always belonged. The content of the paintings disputes those restraints that were being forced upon people on both sides of

24. R. Penck, still officially identified by his family name Winkler, was expatriated in August 1980 and thus began a new career in the West. With this photograph the German painter makes fun of the identity document which the bureaucracy issued for him. He refers to the difficult identity of German art which cannot be recovered by a police document.



the border. Immendorff's way of painting decries how art is demeaned when used as consumer product, in the West, and as propaganda in the East. Seen today, paintings like this already seem to be witnesses to a different era, to a period when two very different kinds of German art revealed the tradition they shared by their antithesis to one another. In protesting against this antithesis, Immendorff's paintings transcend it.

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Today various publishing houses are trying to come up with a history of German art, a difficult task as it turns out, since it is not as though authors knowledgeable in the field have been lining up in the wings for their chance to take the stage again. Specialized research on 'German art' has not stood still over the years, of course, but the topic itself is burdened by a history of interpretation that cannot be passed over in silence. The subject, so long avoided, requires that we pick it up where debate left off long ago. What would such a study look like, one that traces the labyrinthine history of how Germans have searched for themselves in art, and have both accepted and rejected what they found there?

With unification, history caught up with us just when we thought we were finally free of it. It is indeed a historical irony that Germany is faced with the task of forming itself into a nation once again, at the very moment the countries of the Common Market are in the process of merging into one Europe. Unification, as opposed to German integration into the EEC, seems to repeat 1870 and the problems of the founding of Imperial Germany, which for many came as an untimely surprise. We have remained true, it seems, to the logic of 'the belated nation', that painful path to nationhood taken by Germany in modern times.

We were encouraged, in a way, to avoid German history because it was difficult for us to see it from a neutral position. How could we after Auschwitz? Furthermore, as long as we

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were divided it seemed logical enough to accept division as having been forced upon us by fate. A glaring example of this would be the museum *Politik* of divided Berlin, where the German Historical Museum (West) was literally built in response to the Museum for German History (East). All that has changed since unification. United Germany now owns both museums, which it has fused into the new 'United Museum' collection under the direction of former West Berlin museum director, Christoph Stölzl. Naturally, discussions about how the national collection should be organized have since taken centre stage in the capital. The United Museum is confronted with what for Germans is an almost forgotten task, that of self-representation, which our divided heritage not only prevented but precluded. It was therefore deemed necessary to ask foreign critics and scholars for advice about how to represent one's country by way of exhibition. Should such exhibitions be organized within a historical framework – in Germany's case this would include the pre-war, the Nazi and the postwar periods? Or should it focus on German art, another difficult proposition since the majority of such works are owned by museums?

To complicate matters further, not only do we have two national museums of history, but two national galleries as well – three if you count the *Germanisches Nationalmuseum* in Nuremberg. The older of the two, the old *Nationalgalerie*, stands on Museum Island in the River Spree, formerly in East Berlin. It first opened its doors in 1876, not long after the founding of Imperial Germany. As mentioned earlier, the inscription on its front gable dedicates the building to *Der Deutschen Kunst*. The new *Nationalgalerie*, designed by German expatriate Mies van der Rohe, was opened in 1968 with the express purpose of exhibiting under one roof that part of the German art tradition not to have fallen to the GDR. Its

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25. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin, completed 1968. The New National Gallery is the last cry of the great German architect Mies van der Rohe, who had emigrated from Germany in the 1930s. The museum was opened in 1968, at a moment when there no longer seemed any hope for the reunification of Germany. As even the nineteenth-century German works of art had been divided between the East and the West the new museum was destined to become a home for both nineteenth- and twentieth-century international art.

collection had been put together a year before with the addition of the city's collection. Since then, the two museums have stood in diametrical opposition to each other – the older, a monument to Imperial Germany and dedicated to nineteenth-century German art; the newer, a beacon of the young Federal Republic founded to include international works of modern art.

Perhaps it should not surprise us that since unification, museum authorities in Berlin are not only divided as to how future projects should look, but they have even gone so far as

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26. The National Gallery in East Berlin, which was renamed the Old National Gallery after reunification, underwent a thorough restoration of the exterior. This photograph, taken by the author in 1995, shows the site with the banner explaining that the 'nineteenth-century art collection is being restructured'.

to accuse each other of rewriting history, or of betraying it. The return of Museum Island (formerly East Berlin) caused big headaches for planners busily working on West Berlin's museum at *Kemper Platz*. Practical considerations may have played a role in the controversy, but how the debate was conducted reveals not only how insecure we are about our cultural inheritance and how it should be exhibited in a museum environment, but also the embarrassment we feel when confronted with our own history, something that has become second nature to us by now.

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This same embarrassment dominates discussions about the exhibition of works from the former GDR. It is to be expected that these works will be removed from exhibition, even in the eastern provinces where they originated. Those responsible are not sure how to fit them into to their collections. How should they present a chapter of the German tradition that they personally would not have chosen to include? Not only are these works outside the purview of most museums, some artists from western Germany refuse to have their works hung next to

27. It seemed highly symbolic that a monument from Prussian history, designed to shelter and promote German art became a building site. Germany and German history were being revisited and redefined in a like manner.



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works by eastern German artists. Few see this as an opportunity to learn from one another. It is easier to deny that there were two different kinds of art being produced in divided Germany during the Cold War.

Tempers continue to flair when it comes to the exhibition of East German art, but no one seemed to care when, in 1992, the *Kunstmuseum* in Bonn presented an exhibition of German postwar art with works exclusively by the stars of the former West German art scene – each with his own room, Beuys with three. It is a wonderful collection, of course, and interesting because despite efforts by the GDR the exhibited works came from private collections. Seen through the lens of post-unification, the exhibition risked establishing a canon of what its catalogue called modern ‘German art’. But its self-appointed right to determine what constitutes modern German art must be challenged.

Since the end of World War II, the notion of ‘national art’ has lost much of its meaning anyway. Even the concept of ‘European art’ has been called into question, since the art markets of Europe and the USA are no longer separated. Works by artists from both continents are sold in galleries on both sides of the Atlantic. A comparative study of those European and American works that share this market would be worth doing. Is there such a thing as European art? If so, how does it differ from American art?

In an era of global markets and international art, we can consider ourselves privileged if we still have a clear picture of the history of our own country. Contemporary Germany does not enjoy this privilege, for ‘German art’ is no less difficult a subject than ‘German history’ is. It has not been my intention here to bemoan this state of affairs. My goal has been to ask questions about how the Germans have interpreted their own artistic tradition, with the hope that these questions might

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initiate a new debate on the subject. We will need time for this. Yet, one might venture to ask what kind of discussion it will be, and when it will finally begin.

I did not write these essays in order to define what German art is for the reader. I have quoted those who have attempted to do this. Of course, there is such a thing as 'German art', but it has not been my topic here. I have dealt instead with the problems Germans have had over the years with interpreting and accepting it. Sometimes they tried to solve their own personal problems *through* art. It was never an easy subject for them. Not only did they tend to defend German traits against foreign influence, they were constantly at each other's throats as well, at times struggling to prove that their point-of-view was the only right one.

It may be that many of these problems were not really problems at all. Yet in spite of this, or perhaps because of it, the effect that they had on men's minds lasted a long time. It would be misleading, however, to trace the problem to the nineteenth century. The problem did not begin there, regardless of how much bitterness was injected into the 'German question' at that time. As early as the fifteenth century, Dürer had already gone to great lengths justifying homegrown German art in word and works. The Romantics searched for Early German art with the single-mindedness of alchemists obsessed with finding the philosopher's stone. Imperial Germany's *Kunstpolitik* stopped at nothing to keep Germany insulated from the international modern movement, and the Third Reich banned all 'anti-German' art, even though many of the black-listed artists were German born and bred. And finally, there is the recent discussion of *Zweierlei deutsche Kunst* which has prolonged postwar division into the first years after unification.

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German doubts about their own art can be traced back to the time of Dürer, when discourse about art was in its infancy. German scholars and artists were afraid of being stereotyped as artistic barbarians. Then came the Reformation, which tore Germany in half and brought about two different kinds of German art, both of which competed against each other for the right to express the true Christian faith. A state of affairs then arose in which art was easily fused with religion. This lasted until the Enlightenment when art became religion in its own right; a new religion of the arts, if you will, that soon inspired just as many holy crusades as real religion once had.

It was no longer simply a case of 'German art', since the existence of art itself seemed to cry out for justification – a process which inspired the most difficult theoretical efforts imaginable. Ironically, the philosophy of 'German art' reached a point where it was transformed into an abstract concept that transcended all national distinctions. This simplified things for those who would not, or could not, enjoy a work of art for its own sake. It allowed them to take a metaphysical position when it came to 'the arts'. There was a specifically German idealism at work here, one that does not cease to amaze non-Germans at international art congresses to this very day.

Even this idealism, however, did not prevent the Germans from treating art as a vital criterion for defining what it is to be German, as if art was intended to reveal to us who we are. Employed in a search for self-identity, art was twisted to supply a burden of proof that it was never meant to provide. It forced a dangerous correlation to be drawn between a German artistic tradition and patriotic impulses, as though the nation must inherently be reflected by its 'national art'. I refer here specifically to concepts which dominated discussions about art in Imperial Germany, and which found their ruinous conclusion in the Third Reich. No wonder similar discussions

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were carefully avoided during the postwar years. By that time German scholars and critics had tired of the old confessional interpretations and were very wary of the subject in general. My essays do not deal with German art itself, but with the history of its appropriation by the Germans.

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II SEARCHING FOR THE GERMAN STYLE

PERCEPTIONS OF THE GOTHIC IN THE ROMANTIC PERIOD

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